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Her Fairy Prince

Gertrude Warden

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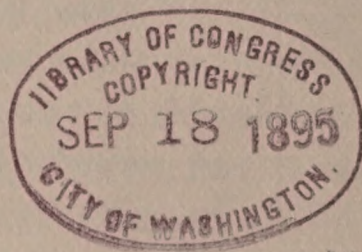
HER FAIRY PRINCE

BY

✓
GERTRUDE WARDEN

AUTHOR OF "THE HAUNTED HOUSE AT KEW," "AS A
BIRD TO THE SNARE," ETC.

35
*Lippincott
novels*



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HER FAIRY PRINCE.

CHAPTER I.

“HALLO, Armstrong! Thought you were in Australia!”

“Hallo, Garth! Thought you were in gaol!”

Such were the greetings interchanged in Boulogne market-place on a hot August forenoon by two Englishmen who had not met for five years.

The first speaker, Mr., or Captain Garth, as he styled himself, was a man of medium height, inclined to stoutness and of florid complexion, with bloodshot blue eyes, plentiful prematurely-white hair, a heavy cavalry moustache, and a jovial swaggering manner. His clothes were carefully brushed and darned, his boots beautifully polished, and his chimney-pot hat, set rakishly on one side on his white curls, was suspiciously shiny in its surface. The Captain's red face, overhanging eyebrows, and ferocious moustache were wont to frighten children, of whom he was specially fond; but his features were well-cut and his manners plausible, and most women considered him a very good-looking man for his six-and-fifty years.

Of his companion's claims to personal beauty there could be no doubt, in spite of the air of drink, dissipation, and neglect which hung about him. Wallace Armstrong at six-and-twenty was intended by nature to be a splendid specimen of muscular manhood—tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous, and sinewy, looming enormous over

the small French soldiers who slouched in twos and threes across the market-place, and followed where he walked by the admiring glances of the stalwart bare-footed fish-girls trooping up and down to and from the quay.

But already Wallace Armstrong had done his best to injure the heritage of vigour and manly beauty which had devolved upon him at birth. Under his eyes, of a brilliant bluish-gray colour shaded by thick black lashes, late hours and hard drinking had imprinted lines and shadows ill-suited to early manhood; his whole expression was sullen and defiant, as though he distrusted and despised his fellowmen and was at little trouble to disguise his feelings towards them. His manner of greeting his old acquaintance was not only insolent as to words, but still more so in the tone he used the while he roughly shook Garth's detaining hand off his coat-sleeve.

"It's of no use to claim acquaintanceship with me now!" Armstrong remarked, harshly. "I'm broke, stone-broke—and, what's more, if I had any money, I know better now than to play cards with you for it!"

Captain Garth's red face grew a shade redder; but he was not sensitive as to snubs, and his tone was altogether friendly when he spoke again.

"We're all broke occasionally," he observed, soothingly; "even I do not absolutely wallow in gold at the present minute. Still, I've a little place up here in the High Town where I can put up a friend in difficulties until things blow over."

"Oh, I'm not wanted by the police, if that's what you mean!" the other interrupted, scornfully. "My early indiscretions have been whitewashed by a visit to Australia, which means that, having got into bad company in England, I was sent across the sea to get into worse company in Australia."

"Have you been back long?" Garth inquired, accommodating with difficulty his footsteps to the long strides of his companion.

"Long enough to spend in Paris the money which was to take me back to England! Look!" And he turned his empty pockets inside out for Garth's edification.

The elder man looked thoughtful, and walked on by his side for some seconds in silence.

"But your uncle?" he suggested at last "Surely Alexander Wallace's credit should help his nephew in raising the 'needful'?"

"A lot of use when for four years the old skinflint has gone about denouncing me as a ne'er-do-weel, and proclaiming the fact that I shall never get another ha'penny from him. I've written to him from here—it was the only thing to be done; but it won't be any good. The picture I drew in my letter of my sick and starving young wife was enough to melt the heart of a stone! But it won't move Uncle Alec."

"Your wife?" Garth repeated, in surprise.

"Yes. The young, lovely, and pious orphan daughter of a clergyman, who fell in love with me on board ship and decided to take in hand my reformation. There never was such a perfect woman—if, indeed, she's alive still; but as, when I wrote, she'd had nothing to eat for three days—and I can swear she's had nothing since—she may very likely be dead by this time!"

Captain Garth was neither a good nor a scrupulous man, but he had the remnants of a heart about him, and his companion's words shocked and startled him.

"Are you mad or drunk, Armstrong?" he cried. "Do you really mean to tell me your wife is here in Boulogne starving?"

Armstrong turned and looked at him. Then he thrust his hands into his empty pockets and burst out laughing.

"Why, you old idiot," he exclaimed, "she's only my wife on paper! What in the world should I want to burden myself with a wife for? Uncle Alec has always been soft-hearted about women, probably because he's had very little to do with them and doesn't know what fools and plagues they are; so the idea came into my head to pitch this starving-wife story, and see whether that would move him. But I don't hope much from it."

"It would be rather awkward, though, if he took you at your word and asked you to produce her!"

"Nothing less likely. He has frequently stated in the letters of good advice he sent me at Melbourne that he never wished to set eyes on me again; and Heaven knows I am not hungering for a sight of the sanctimonious old bag of bones! My precious cousin is now the darling of his eye, the industrious apprentice and good boy, and all that sort of thing! He has been taken into the bank, and, no doubt, will get the old screw's money when he dies—if he ever will die, which I am beginning to doubt! He never would if I were his heir, for certain. Curse my luck!"

Clearly Armstrong was in a communicative mood as he strode along, every now and then savagely kicking the stones on the pathway. His last franc had been spent on a dose of fiery cognac, which, taken after long fasting, had mounted to his brain and brought on a talkative mood. All the time they conversed the two men were mounting the dusty white road which led to the High Town, Armstrong insensibly and Garth by design.

Captain Garth, as has been said before, was not wholly ill-natured. Five years before he had had some hand in the ruining of Wallace Armstrong, then a high-spirited lad of one-and-twenty, and known to be the favourite nephew of a wealthy Scotch banker. At that time Garth was the secret proprietor of a gambling club, and

it was to meet the liabilities contracted there that young Armstrong forged his uncle's name, and was subsequently banished from his native country and his uncle's favour. The gambling club in question had been raided and dispersed long ago; but Garth had evaded the law and taken up his residence abroad. He was now really sorry to note the shabbiness and recklessness of his former dupe, and was casting about in his mind as to whether he could not assist him with possible profit to himself.

"Come up to my diggings!" he said, cheerily. "My little girl will cook us a cutlet and mix a French salad as well as any waiter in Paris!"

"Your little girl? I didn't know you had any family!"

"Mrs. Garth died in England three years ago," returned the Captain. "She was a very good woman, according to her lights; but—h'm—a little narrow, you know! Country rector's sister, kept house for him in a Sussex village, fell in love with a handsome blue-eyed young racing-man she saw in church. I like church—it's an institution that ought to be kept up. And eighteen years ago, Armstrong,—though I say it that shouldn't—there wasn't a better-looking fellow at Goodwood than Randolph Garth. I have always been weak—I own it—where a pretty woman is concerned; and the late Mrs. Garth was certainly pretty, though she was eight-and-twenty when I first met her, and had never had an offer. That sly old brother of hers drove would-be suitors away—wanted to keep her little pittance—just a beggarly life-interest in three hundred a year in the family, d'ye see? But she fell in love, as pretty women will, quarrelled with her family, ran away to London, and met and married me by appointment in an old church in the City. As to the little misunderstandings which followed, no doubt each of us was a little to blame; but Mrs. Garth was a lady, and never made

scenes. Our methods of life didn't suit; so ten years ago we parted quite amicably, and my wife settled down with our little girl Laline in a cottage in the Lake district, where I visited them occasionally. Three years ago Mrs. Garth died very suddenly, and her income died with her. So my little girl had to come over and rough it in Boulogne with her father."

Such was the story of his marriage, detailed airily by Captain Garth—a story true in the main, but with many touches omitted which would have lent meaning and pathos to the whole. The story of a good and tender woman's mistake, of her gradual disillusion and growing hopelessness, and of the self-sacrifice by which, at last, she forfeited annually one-third of her little income to her worthless husband, in order that she might keep and educate her child far from the gambling, drinking, and unscrupulous set to which the man she had once so loved belonged.

Possibly, had Wallace Armstrong paid much attention to Garth's story, he might have read between the lines some of these truths; but he was at present too much occupied with his own affairs to trouble himself with the autobiography of a man whom he despised and mistrusted.

The Rue Planché, where Captain Garth's lodgings were situated, was a mean street in the High Town, composed of tumble-down ill-built little houses, painted in various tints of cream-and-mustard colour, one storey high, and furnished with green shutters and little back gardens liberally adorned with clothes to dry.

One worn step only divided No. 7, Rue Planché, from the street. The front door was open as the two men approached, showing a very narrow, brick-paved passage, and the linen-hung garden beyond, in which *la mère Benoîte*, the Captain's landlady, was engaged in

hanging up clothes. The Captain's rooms comprised a little *salon* on the right, and a little *salle-à-manger* on the left of the entrance, and up-stairs two tiny bedrooms; but before now Mr. Garth had put up a friend on the sofa of one of the ground-floor rooms, and he was prepared to offer a similar privilege to the nephew of Alexander Wallace.

The *salon* was the Captain's special den. Although the window was open, the scent of spirits and stale tobacco hung on the air, a few sporting prints adorned the walls, and the Captain's desk was littered by cuttings from sporting papers. A card-table stood in the middle of the room, and an empty bottle of cognac, half a dozen glasses, and a dirty well-thumbed pack of cards clearly showed the manner in which the Captain had spent the preceding evening. Nothing in this room was removed except by Garth's special permission; but when he caught sight of the sardonic expression on his visitor's face, he shut the door somewhat hastily, and inwardly regretted that he had not ordered the place to be put straight before leaving home that morning.

"At your old tricks, I see," Armstrong observed, an unpleasant smile curving his full lips under his heavy black moustache.

"Oh, just a game with the boys, to charm away homesickness in the evenings. But I must introduce you to my little girl. Laline," he cried, throwing open the door of the *salle-à-manger*, "I have brought a visitor—Mr. Wallace Armstrong!"

Even Armstrong's clouded senses understood at once the contrast offered by this apartment to the dirty and neglected-looking *salon*. Here the green shutters were wide open, letting the sunlight flood the shining deal flooring, stained and polished to resemble oak, and the cheap suite of dining-room furniture, which had been

beautified in the same manner. An earthenware jug, filled with poppies, marguerites, and cornflowers, stood on the mantelpiece, and a bowl of poppies on the snowy well-darned cloth laid upon the table, which article of furniture was pushed back to allow full space for the gambols of a girl, a cat, and a kitten on the uncarpeted floor.

Laline's back was turned to the two men as they entered. She was kneeling, holding a small black-and-white Persian kitten high above her head, and the sunlight from the window seemed to concentrate and shimmer in the loose masses of her abundant auburn hair, from which a restraining black ribbon had slipped on to the floor. Her dress was a long, loose blouse of dark-blue linen, yoked at the neck and wrists, and falling straight to her ankles, and her slim feet, in blue cashmere stockings, were innocent of shoes, Laline having kicked off her little high-heeled slippers in school-girl fashion, the better to enjoy her game of "romps."

Immediately in front of her sat the mother-cat, watching the struggles of her squeaking kitten with attention, but with no apparent alarm. She was a matron of ripe experience, and was well assured that her young ones would come to no harm in the hands of Laline Garth. The girl was laughing as the door opened, a happy laugh of childish gaiety, which sounded wonderfully sweet to Wallace Armstrong's ears.

"Aren't you frightened, Nell? Aren't you afraid that I shall let your silly scratching little ball of fluff fall and kill itself? Oh, you unnatural mother!"

"Laline," said the Captain again, "here is a gentleman to see us."

She sprang to her feet and faced them, still holding the kitten—a lovely overgrown child, to all appearance, a bright rose-flush mantling in her sunburnt cheeks right

up to the long, brown lashes of her hazel eyes. A very, very pretty child, too tall for her short skirts, too long in the arm for her short sleeves, from which her slender brown wrists were thrust out too far. There existed no trace of likeness between the girl and her father. From her mother Laline inherited her slender limbs, her bright hair, broad brow, level eyebrows, and a certain delicate grace which distinguished her even at this half-formed period from other girls of her age. Only one detail of her face suggested that she had experienced more of life's trials than her years warranted—two little perpendicular lines between her eyebrows became clearly marked as her father presented her to this handsome, ill-dressed, unshaved young man, with the loose mouth, square jaw, and singularly-attractive blue eyes.

"Won't you shake hands with me, Miss Laline?" Wallace asked, gently. "Or am I too dirty?"

She held out her small brown hand in silence, looking straight up into his face as she did so. And at the questioning gaze of her dreamy, dark eyes Armstrong's eyes fell. It was absurd, of course, as he told himself afterwards when he recalled this incident, and due to his nerves being in a bad order, but it seemed as though this child's look conveyed a reproach.

"I had no idea, Garth, that your little girl, as you called her, would be such a tall, well-grown young lady," he said, turning to Garth to hide his sudden embarrassment. "She looks quite fourteen or fifteen."

"I am sixteen to-day," Laline said, in full, sweet tones.

Laline's voice was unlike any voice which Armstrong had ever heard, with a sound in it which constitutes what the French call *une voix voilée*, a low-pitched cooing inflection, peculiarly soothing to the ear.

"Have you had any nice presents?" he asked, determining instantly to go down to the town and buy the

pretty child some sweets, until, with a hot flush of vexation, he remembered his empty pockets.

"I haven't had any presents," the girl answered; and then, with a little break in her voice, she added, "Papa had forgotten the date!"

"Not at all, my dear, not at all. The fact was I was on my way to choose you some pretty trifle when I met our friend here. And, as soon as you and the good Bénévoite have prepared us a little *déjeuner*, I will go down to the town and get you some little souvenir. But now a cutlet and a little salad will be acceptable; and here"—he fumbled in his pockets and produced at length a coin—"take this, my child, to Monsieur Desjardins, and bring a bottle of *vin ordinaire*. He'll let you take it for cash, though we have a little account there."

Laline took a wide-brimmed Zulu straw hat from a nail, slung a basket over her arm, and went pattering down the stone-paved street on the little wooden-heeled shoes, into which she had thrust her feet when disturbed at her play. Wallace Armstrong leaned his elbows on the window-sill and stared after the slim figure in blue with hair that shone gold in the bright sunlight.

"How in the world," he said to Garth, without looking round, "do you come to have a daughter like that? And what are you about letting her potter about dirty little wine-shops in Boulogne?"

"Monsieur Desjardins is our grocer—a most respectable person," returned Captain Garth, joining Armstrong at the window and lighting a cigarette. "Every one knows that Laline and I belong to the upper classes, although we're not very ready with our money just now."

"I'm sorry for the child," was his companion's only comment—"very sorry!"

CHAPTER II.

LALINE, for her part, had almost forgotten the time when she had first flushed with indignation at the notion of running errands for her father.

One gets used to a great many things in three years, and it was three years since Laline, a forlorn little figure in deep mourning, had stood on the deck of a Folkestone steamer on her way to her widowed father and her motherless home. Of her father she knew very little indeed at that time, not having seen him for two years. England had become too hot to hold Mr. Garth about that period, and he had taken up his residence permanently in Boulogne; but for many years before he had been practically a stranger in that tiny household in Westmoreland. The late Mrs. Garth had been a gentle, dreamy-eyed lady, of refined but narrow mind, fond of poetry, fancywork, church-decoration, and district-visiting, easily shocked, and thoroughly orthodox in her views on all subjects. Her great aim with regard to her daughter, whom she loved devotedly, was to make of her a refined gentlewoman, and to guard her from all knowledge of, and contact with, the wickedness of the great world outside the hills of Westmoreland.

From this life of watchfulness, this sheltered, peaceful existence under the shadow of the little grey church in the valley, Laline was unexpectedly torn and transferred to an atmosphere of debt, neglect, and shiftlessness, the life of a ruined gamester, exiled from his native country, and earning by his wits a precarious subsistence in a back street of Boulogne.

Before her tears for her mother's loss were dry, Laline had begun to realise that Captain Garth fully intended

that she should, in some measure, make up to him for the hundred a year which he had lost by his wife's death. He was kind to her in his manner, but he never for one moment understood her. When he tried to speak to her of her mother, she received his remarks in silence, watching him with great eyes full of wondering pain. His talk jarred on the girl, and it seemed a desecration to hear him discuss his dead wife in his favourite terms.

"A good woman, a very good woman, according to her lights! We didn't quite hit it off together; but I am not blaming her. And no doubt she has done her best with you; no doubt—— Why, my dear, what are you crying for?"

"I would so much rather that you did not talk to me about mother," the girl had said; and Captain Garth had respected her wish without in the least understanding it.

Then began a twofold existence for the dreamy, imaginative child. An indoor life of poverty and hard work—cooking, washing, tidying, dusting, and mending, under the superintendence of Bénétoite, until Laline could replace Aurélie the *bonne* and spare her father the latter's keep and wages, and an outdoor life of long rambles, sometimes by herself and sometimes in charge of the little Bertins' next door, up to the *vallée* or down to the sands and along the shore to the neighbouring seaside villages, with her friend the sea lapping the sands at her feet.

Day-dreams for ever filled her mind, sharing it with recollections of her happy childhood among the hills. Her soft, near-sighted eyes could never with bare vision perceive the coast of England; but the eldest Bertin boy possessed a telescope, by the aid of which she could distinguish with a bounding heart the white cliffs of her native land. All that she knew of joy and peace, of tender love and gentle sympathy, of refinement and of

culture, came from her English experiences ; her present life, half drudgery, half solitary wandering, was lonely and hard by comparison. In England she had been the one thought of her mother's mind, the vicar's favourite pupil, the village pet, "little Miss Garth," daughter of a lady known and honoured by all. Here, in the Rue Planché, she was "*la p'tite Gart*," who ran errands, begged for credit from tradespeople, and looked after the *ménage* with deaf and irascible old Bénéôte.

Of her beauty Laline was unconscious ; a few artists had sketched her from memory, and she had seen the sketches, and wondered whether her hair really looked like that in the sunshine. But she had read *Ivanhoe* and other novels by Walter Scott, and her ideal of loveliness was the black-haired type with sloping shoulders, alabaster brow, eyes black as night, and the smallest possible mouth.

French romances, except some especially goody-goody stories avowedly intended for the very young, were altogether unknown to her. Captain Garth respected the childlike innocence of his daughter's mind and locked up his amusing paper-covered novels. Of her father's sporting and card-playing associates Laline knew but little. Captain Garth received visitors in his den, which the girl never entered unless her father was the sole occupant of the room. He would have wished to pose before her as a high-minded, hardworking, and honourable gentleman, driven from his country and his equals by the envious spite of a cabal and the undeserved blows of "outrageous fortune ;" but when he vapoured to his little girl concerning his high principles and unrecognised genius, Laline said never a word, and contented herself with scanning him with soft eyes which saw outer things but dimly, but which seemed to have the gift at times of divining the hidden spirit beyond.

Walking down the rough stone-paved street on this particular midsummer day, Laline's thoughts busied themselves with the figure of Wallace Armstrong the tallest, handsomest Englishman to whom she had ever yet spoken. No self-consciousness touched her mind; she knew quite well that both Mr. Armstrong and her father regarded her as a child, and she had not the slightest wish to develop into a "young lady," fenced in with conventional proprieties. Captain Garth so seldom introduced any of his associates to her that that fact alone was sufficient to attract her notice; and then this powerfully-built young man with the black brows, drooping black moustache, brilliant eyes, and saturnine expression at once interested the girl from his resemblance to her ideal of the Templar in *Ivanhoe*.

Mr. Wallace Armstrong could not be very good, she decided. Her knowledge of evil was limited, but she opined that he played cards, and put money on horses and swore when they lost, and that he drank cognac, and perhaps did not pay his bills. His voice had sounded gentle enough in speaking to her, but rough and scornful when he addressed her father. Just so must Brian de Bois-Guilbert's voice have rung out, harsh and imperious, when he rated Rebecca's father. And yet Laline began to wonder at the fair Jewess's invincible dislike against the Templar. Meantime her little high-heeled feet had taken her to Monsieur Desjardins's, and the old man behind the counter, grumbling, took the money she proffered, and bade her remind her father that his little account had long been unsettled.

"*La p'tite Gart* is growing too tall for her short skirts," his wife remarked, as Laline left the shop. "She becomes *une très-jolie fille*, and will soon be wanting a nice little *beau*."

"Bah! It is a child!" responded her husband. "In

England they do not think of love and marriage until they are old maids of five- or six-and-twenty. Mam'selle Laline has a good ten years yet."

Déjeuner at Rue Planché was a success that day. Laline cooked to perfection, and waited at table deftly. At the latter arrangement Wallace Armstrong demurred. He disliked to see so pretty a girl made into a household drudge; but Laline explained that Bénoîte's snuff-taking proclivities rendered her an undesirable waitress. She did not add that the household resources were at so low an ebb that cutlets at luncheon were a luxury she could not permit herself; she contented herself with assuring Mr. Armstrong that she had already partaken of luncheon, dignifying by that name a plate of thin vegetable soup and a piece of stale bread in the kitchen.

Eating made Wallace more hopeful. After all, as Captain Garth reminded him, he was six-and-twenty, and nephew to one of the richest men in London. No man was worthy the name, so the elder declared, who had not "sown his wild oats;" and the prodigal son, or prodigal nephew, as the case might be, was always the favourite in the end. Card-playing was not an exciting pastime between two men, neither of whom possessed any money or any immediate certainty of procuring any; but habit made them gamble away the sunny hours of a midsummer afternoon until five o'clock, when Armstrong suggested that they should stroll down to the hotel where he had been staying since his arrival in Boulogne three days before, and ascertain whether by chance there was any answer to his appeal to his uncle.

With characteristic improvidence, Wallace Armstrong had put up at an hotel which, although not specially dear as summer seaside prices go, was most certainly far beyond his means. Since his arrival at this estab-

lishment, which was under French management and faced the Museum in the Grand Rue, the big shabby young Englishman had consumed hardly any food, but a large amount of drinks, and the *patron* within the office in the hall eyed him askance as he approached and inquired for letters.

“Mais, oui, Monsieur; il y a bien une lettre.”

Wallace seized it, and the blood rushed to his face. The address was in his uncle's handwriting, and the letter was registered!

“Come outside,” he said, after he had signed the receipt, thrusting his hand within Garth's arm. “I don't want these prying foreigners to get wind of my affairs.”

Standing under an awning in front of a shop, Wallace tore open his uncle's letter, and Garth, watching him furtively under his white eyebrows, noted the swift changes of expression which passed over his face. First astonishment, then amusement, and finally a baffled and angered look characterised his features as he thrust the letter into the hands of his companion.

“Read it,” he said, “and see if your infernal cunning can get me out of the scrape! It beats me!”

Alexander Wallace's handwriting was small and cramped, but perfectly legible. His letter was written from his London office, and ran as follows,—

“DEAR NEPHEW,—If it be true that a pious and virtuous lady has been so misguided as to link her fate with such an idle and dissipated ne'er-do-weel as I fear you have become, your wife has my heartiest sympathy. But I have a belief which is almost unlimited in the capability of a good woman for reforming a man, however deeply he be sunk in depravity, and I intend, for your wife's sake, to give you yet another chance. To

this end I send you ten pounds to relieve your present necessities; and within a week, if your wife is strong enough to travel, I will forward the money wherewith you may at once make your way to my house in London. But understand—my future dealings with you will depend upon your absolute truthfulness and candour in the matter. If I find that Mrs. Wallace Armstrong is indeed what you describe—a gentle, high-minded, romantic, and unworldly young lady, your equal in birth, of truly Christian training, devoted to you, and believing in your higher capabilities, I will take both her and you into my house, which sadly needs the sweetening presence of a daughter for my old age. More than that; upon your arrival with your wife at my office—armed, of course, with all necessary credentials, such as your marriage-certificate and such papers as shall show your wife's position and home-training before you married her—I will provide you with immediate employment, and I will settle upon your wife, whose name, by-the-way, you do not mention, the sum of three hundred pounds a year, to be paid quarterly for her sole use and benefit, and to be increased in a given time to five hundred if I deem it expedient. On receipt of this letter and enclosure I must ask you to pay at once all that you owe at the hotel, to provide your wife with food and necessaries, and to send on to me full receipts for all amounts you may disburse from the enclosed ten pounds. Will you also tell me at what date I may expect you and your wife, and you shall receive by return the necessary sum for your fares and other expenses incidental on your journey. Remember, I had not meant, nor had I wished, to see your face again; but, if a good woman has been brought to believe in you, and to link her fate with yours, I will try to forget your past conduct, and will give you yet one more chance of attaining that posi-

tion which, but for your follies and vices, should be yours already.

“Your uncle,

“ALEXANDER WALLACE.”

Captain Garth read the letter twice through. Then he returned it to its owner and began pulling reflectively at his white moustache.

“My boy,” he observed, “it is a poser—certainly a poser! But the chance is not one to let slip. Three hundred a year going begging for want of a wife. We must have a *petit verre* together at the nearest *café* out of this sunshine and think it over. Three hundred a year!”

Oddly enough, as he reflected, it was the exact amount of the late Mrs. Garth’s life-interest, which had passed away on her death to her own family. A third of that had been his; and although two pounds a week was an absurd trifle for a gentleman of his taste and social position, yet, with only himself to keep, it had often sufficed in bad times to keep the wolf from the door. And times grew worse instead of better, and the three hundred would probaby soon be increased to five—more than that, if once Wallace Armstrong was restored to his uncle’s favour, the lion’s share of old Wallace’s wealth might well be his some day, since, of the banker’s two nephews, he had undoubtedly at that time been the best-loved. Such a chance must by no means be allowed to slip from this young man’s grasp.

It must not be supposed that Captain Garth’s solicitude on Armstrong’s behalf was wholly unselfish. At fifty-six Captain Garth was almost incapable of formulating any plan into which self-interest entered not, and he clearly wanted, in his own parlance, to “make a good thing out of” Wallace Armstrong. He set then to work

drawing up a mental inventory of the potential brides with any one of whom, at the shortest possible notice, he might unite his young friend in matrimony.

"There is only one thing to be done, of course," he said, sipping the cognac Armstrong had ordered on the strength of his uncle's remittance, and jotting down names in pencil on his cuff under the awning of the *café*—"there is only one thing to be done. You must get married."

Wallace stared at him, and then laughed contemptuously.

"If that's all you've got to suggest," he observed, "I can dispense with your advice!"

"Now, my boy, be reasonable! With a wife you can get your fare to England at once advanced, return to the bosom of your family with everything forgotten and forgiven, enjoy the fatted calf, obtain in all probability a position in your uncle's bank, live in his house rent-free, pocket a tidy little income, and eventually succeed to the bulk of your uncle's property. Without a wife—well, I don't want to be too personal, but you know best the details of your present financial position."

"You talk as if getting married were as easy as putting on one's coat!" Armstrong broke out impatiently. "I've had a rough time of it lately, but, thank Heaven, I've never been dragged down by a nagging, whining woman. I've never yet met the woman who was worth spending half an hour's thought upon—an extravagant, capricious, vain, mercenary, hypocritical crew——"

"Perhaps your experiences have been unfortunate?" suggested Garth, soothingly. "There are plenty of nice girls about, plenty, if one knows where to find them."

"Nice girls," sneered Armstrong, "who would be ready at a moment's notice to marry a penniless scamp

with scarcely a rag to his back who hasn't even the decency to pretend to be in love with them!"

"Nice girls," Garth repeated, imperturbably, "who are not very happy at home, and who would be glad enough to make a good wife to a fine handsome young fellow, nephew to old Alexander Wallace, who would provide them with a comfortable home and a liberal allowance of pocket-money."

"You mean that I can buy a wife with all the domestic virtues for this promised three hundred a year?" Armstrong inquired, harshly.

"Well, yes—that's one way of putting it, if you like!" returned Garth, his patience beginning to give way. "Great Scot, man! You can't expect to have sentiment thrown in, too, in matters of this kind! What do most girls marry for? Why, a comfortable home, of course. And when they marry for anything else, such as a fine figure or a twinkling eye or a handsome pair of moustaches, what is the result? When the tax-collector and the butcher's and baker's bills come in at the door, love flies out at the window. It's all a matter of money and expediency. They manage these things much better here in France."

"You forget," said Wallace, "that, when I wrote to my uncle a week ago, I described myself as already married. Even if this paragon of a bride can be discovered, there would be, I suppose, some necessary delay before the ceremony could be performed——"

"About three weeks."

"Just so. And my wily old uncle has requested me to bring my certificate with me."

"That might be arranged. A little mistake as to the date, and the necessary delay before your wife is strong enough to travel—remember, you said she was starving, and a girl doesn't get over that in a day."

“And, after all this, where is the girl?”

The Captain recommenced pulling his white moustache and glanced at the initials scrawled in pencil on his cuff.

“I have a friend in the town,” he began again, after a few seconds’ reflection. “Talented man—Oxford man—but down on his luck. His daughters are good-looking girls and very much admired. The younger one is really handsome, a big blonde, very fine girl indeed—Nanny Westbrook. I could take you round this evening and introduce you.”

“How old is she?”

“Oh, ha—one can never tell a woman’s age! Not more than thirty, and looks much less. A very good amateur actress, and could do all the parson’s-orphan-daughter-business thoroughly well. A really jolly girl, full of fun, with no nonsense about her. The best waltzer in the town, too. Last carnival ball here she went as a Pierrette, and I assure you she was the belle of the room. Didn’t look more than eighteen, on my honour.”

“None of your carnival-ball hacks for me!” said Armstrong, in a tone of disgust. “I know the type, and I hate it! If I’ve got to put up with a wife at all, I’ll have one who’ll stay at home and behave decently and give me no trouble. I don’t think they grow them among your Boulogne acquaintances.”

Two Frenchmen, who were sipping coffee and absinthe at an adjoining table, broke at this moment into lively expressions of admiration at sight of a young girl coming up from the quay.

“Look well, Jules! Is she not ravishing, the little English girl? She is English assuredly; no French girl so pretty as that would be promenading about all alone. It is not often that the English have such pretty

feet. But, *sapristi*, what a dress! It is rather like a blue-bag than a gown! These English girls have no coquetry!"

The object of their remarks was none other than Laline Garth, fresh from a long swim out to sea, her loose auburn hair drying on her shoulders in the sun, the low, level rays of which shone in her soft, dark eyes and lit up the bright tints of her cheeks and lips. Hers was the *beauté du diable* which nothing can spoil—not even shapeless gowns, ill-fitting silk-gloves, and a Zulu hat which cost fifty centimes—the sparkling evanescent loveliness of a child merging into a maiden.

Wallace Armstrong turned in his seat at the Frenchman's words and looked fixedly under his level, black brows at Laline as she climbed the hill with swift, springing steps.

"Garth," he said, suddenly, "I've made up my mind to take your advice. And I'll marry your daughter Laline."

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN GARTH'S second *petit verre* of cognac almost dropped from his fingers on its way to his lips in his astonishment at his young friend's proposition.

"Laline," he repeated, blankly—"you marry Laline? Why, man, she's a child—a baby!"

"She is sixteen," Armstrong repeated, coolly, "and she'd look older if you dressed her properly. French girls of all classes marry at sixteen."

"So do English—factory-hands!" Garth broke in, bluntly. "But the daughters of English gentlemen haven't left the schoolroom at that age."

"Your daughter has. What are you making of her?"

A household drudge—nothing more or less! It's no good coming any of the parental love-business with me, Garth. I've got to marry apparently, and my wife must be a pretty, young English girl of blameless reputation, connected with the clergy, and all that sort of thing. Well, from what you tell me of your little girl, her mother brought her up in a way that would be quite after my old psalm-singing uncle's heart. I don't pretend to be in love with her; but I've never seen a prettier or sweeter face than hers; and, even if she can't be a wife or a companion to me at first, we shall no doubt grow as fond of each other in due time as most married people. She has just the face and voice to get round Uncle Alec. I'm hanged if I can understand how she comes to be your daughter? She's not in the least like you, or, you may take my word for it, I shouldn't want to marry her! Of course I don't expect you to agree to anything that isn't to your own advantage. Your daughter can't be worse off than she is here; and I'm ready to offer you compensation for the loss of her services. Once she's married me, she's got to be an orphan, and you've got to be a dead clergyman; but, as you'll be paid something for keeping quiet, that won't matter."

Captain Garth glanced at his proposed son-in-law under his white eyebrows, and his expression was by no means friendly. A lifetime of snubs and shifts had not succeeded in destroying the man's conceit and self-importance, and only the thought of old Alexander Wallace's millions checked his desire to resent Mr. Armstrong's studied insolence of tone and words. Even now he would at once have rejected the young man's proposal from sheer personal dislike but for the fact that the little household in Rue Planché was financially in a very bad way indeed, and that the precarious living

which the self-styled captain earned as bookmaker, gambler, speculator in antiques and curios, cicerone, and money-lender, had of late brought in less and less grist to the mill. Yet somewhere in Randolph Garth's tortuous mind there lurked an appreciation for what is good and pure, and he heartily wished that some other man's daughter and not his own could be sacrificed to Wallace Armstrong.

For it would be a sacrifice. Garth knew it, with his experience of the seamy side of life and the worst qualities of his fellow-men. He could read it in the fierceness and sullenness of Armstrong's expression, in the puffiness of the skin under his eyes and their bloodshot whites, in the shakiness of the strong brown hand which raised the glass to his lips, and in the lips themselves, over-full and sensual in outline, perpetually curving in an ugly sneer.

As if to emphasise the contrast between her and the man who had asked her hand in marriage, Laline herself stopped on the opposite side of the street and began talking and laughing with a group of French children, comprising the little Bertins and others of her neighbours. The little white-headed, brown-faced, toddling things pulled at her hands; evidently they all wished her to go down again to the sands with them, and she was as plainly pleading her household duties as her excuse.

"Voyons donc, Laline! Viens avec nous!"

Laline laughed and shook her head. Her small, regular teeth shone white as a child's between her parted red lips. The two Frenchmen beneath the *café* awning sat up, twirled their moustaches, and wasted many an ogle over the road, tributes to her beauty which Laline was too short-sighted to see, and which, if she had seen them, would have filled her with wonder.

The sight of his daughter seemed to trouble Garth's conscience. It was almost as though he heard the voice of her dead mother in his ear, begging him to remember his trust and to guard Laline against such men as the one who sat by his side.

"It is nonsense," he muttered, suddenly, "to talk of marrying a child like that! It is not as if she were even precocious—she has scarcely left off playing with her dolls. In a year or two's time it will be quite early enough for her to think of sweethearts. Besides, she wouldn't dream of leaving me and her home for a stranger; and the days of a stern parent coercing his child into a hated marriage are over, if they ever existed."

"Will you let me try and persuade her?" suggested Armstrong. "You don't see the best side of me; but then I have an old grudge against you. And I can be very nice when I choose."

Before Garth could answer, Armstrong had risen and crossed the sunny street to where the girl stood talking to the laughing children. His long shadow fell across Laline's face as she stooped to kiss the youngest Bertin, and a sudden silence came upon the erstwhile animated group.

"I wanted to know, Miss Garth," Wallace began, in a tone of genial kindness, "whether you and your young friends would like some sweets and pastry, because I am going to buy some myself at a certain fascinating shop at the corner of the Rue de la Paix, and, as I am certain to make myself ill if I go in all by myself, I propose that you should all come with me and protect me."

The children's shyness vanished at such a proposition; and very soon Captain Garth, from his seat before the *café*, saw a little procession pass down towards the quay; in front, two little Bertin boys and Maggie Royston, aged eleven, from No. 15, Rue Planché, and, a little way behind

them, Laline, leading two smaller Bertins by the hand, while a younger Royston trotted contentedly by the side of the big shabbily-dressed young man with the blue eyes and the black moustache, and grasped his fingers confidently.

After all, the Captain told himself, there must be a lot of good in a man so fond of children as Armstrong appeared to be. He was still little more than a boy, and would probably settle down now that he was given another chance, and become quite a respectable member of society. Reformed rakes proverbially make the best husbands; and it was not so easy nowadays to marry a girl without a penny to her name that she could afford to be over-particular as to the character of her suitors. Besides, what was there against Armstrong? A little over-partiality for cards, for drink, and for fast society, a little mistake as to a certain signature on a certain cheque; mere trifles these, such as could easily be lived down and forgotten by any man with a decent balance at his banker's. Laline would be kindly treated—Alexander Wallace would see to that. The old gentleman was clearly longing to fold a daughter to his heart; and, once Laline was installed in his house, there was little doubt but that she would soon become indispensable to his happiness.

"She's a good girl, an excellent little girl," the Captain said to himself; "and, 'pon my soul, I think it's the best thing I can do for her! She seems quite to take to the fellow. He's a gentleman, and may some day be worth his twenty-five thousand a year. She's getting too tall and too pretty for those childish pinafore frocks, and I can't afford to dress her well. I wonder how much he means to offer me? He's deucedly hard and sharp for a young man; but, if I let him marry Laline, he couldn't surely think of putting me off with less than three

pounds a week, to be raised to two hundred a year later on. I must have it all down in black and white, though, for it's my belief he's a slippery customer. Curse his impudent airs!"

From which soliloquy it may be gathered that Captain Garth was gradually reconciling himself to the prospect of parting from his only child.

He did not attempt to join his daughter and her companions. If Armstrong really could contrive to impress Laline favourably, he should have a fair field and no favour; and, with this idea in his mind, the Captain presently betook himself to his favourite billiard-table in the town, where he talked largely to his customary acquaintances of his young friend Wallace Armstrong, godson and favourite nephew of old Alexander Wallace the banker, and certain heir to his vast fortune; and, on the strength of Armstrong's future wealth, he succeeded in borrowing five francs from one of the *habitués* of the table.

At a quarter to seven it occurred to him that Wallace Armstrong must stand him a dinner out of his uncle's cheque; so, putting down his billiard-cue, he thrust his fingers jauntily through his white curls before a looking-glass, set his hat a little on one side, and sallied forth on his young friend's track. He judged that Laline and the children had probably gone home, and was therefore greatly surprised at hearing his own name cried from a *fiacre* which was being driven through the principal street of the town with the rapid and zigzag course of the Gallic cabman. Within were seated Wallace Armstrong and Laline in the places of honour, and on Wallace's knee was placed the youngest Mademoiselle Bertin, hugging a new doll and eating sweets from a paper bag. Three more children with their backs to the horses, and the eldest Bertin boy on the box, all looked equally hot,

tired, and happy, and laden with sweets and toys, while Laline's eyes shone like stars in her excitement and delight.

The toys and sweets had not cost very much, and even the enchanting drive was not an unreasonably-priced item. But this good fairy of a Mr. Armstrong had confided to Laline that he owed her father a great deal of money, and had been by him authorised to spend a part of it upon her. As a result, she was wearing her first beautiful shop-made hat of black open-work straw and black lace, with a wreath of small, pink rosebuds outlining her fresh, young face, and other rosebuds decorating the crown. Fifteen francs had been the price of this triumph of millinery; and in all her life afterwards Laline never again derived from any clothes the absolute joy the wearing of this first smart hat afforded her.

Sweets and cakes, too, she loved, as do all girls of sixteen; and, most of all, she enjoyed having her small friends about her to participate in these unexpected favours of fortune. Her frank gratitude made Wallace wince more than once; and, when she thanked him for his goodness, he interrupted her almost roughly.

"Don't, Miss Garth, please! I am not good, and I don't like it!"

At his tone a startled look came into her eyes, and, seeing it, he bent towards her, speaking very gently.

"The fact is, I am very fond of children—small ones like these, and grown-up ones like you."

"Oh, but you wouldn't call me grown up, even in this hat, would you?" she asked, with a happy little laugh. "I think I'm a tiresome sort of age—neither the one thing nor the other."

"And which would you rather be?"

"A child, if I could be a child as I used to be. I was

so happy! But that seems a long time ago. I shouldn't like to be a child again as things are now!"

He noted the sadness of her tone, and instantly divined that she was thinking with regret of the old days when her mother was still alive. But he was too tactful to try to seek her confidence as yet.

"I suppose you don't often have treats, since such simple things please you?" he presently suggested.

"Oh, never!" she answered, promptly. "You see papa has to work very hard, and cannot afford it. But this has been a most beautiful birthday; and, thanks to you, Mr. Armstrong, I feel a regular Cinderella, and you are the good fairy."

"I would rather be the prince."

"Would you?"

"Yes. You see he married Cinderella."

His tone was so entirely playful that Laline attached no importance to his words, though she remembered them long afterwards. Her freedom from self-consciousness interested and pleased him. He began to feel regretful that he could not wait until this sweet, childish frankness developed into a maturer charm. This was a school-girl to pet and caress, not a woman to love as a wife. But, half-fledged bird as she was, she was yet the prettiest thing he had ever seen; and to Armstrong, who had no domestic tastes, the idea of an unworldly, unsuspecting little creature, who would obey implicitly, exact nothing in return, and contentedly spend her time alone with her needlework by her own fireside, was more agreeable than the prospect of the love and companionship of the wisest and the most helpful and devoted wife ever sent by Heaven to bless a lonely man's career.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT was a gala day in Laline's life, a day towards which, in after years, she often looked back with a swift pain at her heart.

How kind they had all seemed! Wallace Armstrong was gentleness itself, and there was in his manner towards her a blending of protecting care with playful admiration peculiarly flattering to a girl in her early teens. Her father, too, was unusually indulgent; and, when he got into the *fiacre* at Wallace's invitation, and drove back with them to the High Town and the Rue Planché, it was quite a triumphal journey, and the arrival at number seven created considerable sensation. Even Bénéôte was almost civil. Decidedly, she told herself, *Monsieur le Capitaine* had got hold of a rich and foolish young man, to whom gold was as dross—a *riche Anglais eccentric*, who might very possibly be coaxed into paying the arrears of monsieur's rent. So that Bénéôte, like every one else, saw everything *colour de rose* that evening. And when Laline at last went to bed, after a dinner—a real substantial dinner, with good red wine—her first dinner at a restaurant—and in her new hat, too, with her father and his friend—she laid her head upon her pillow, convinced of her mistake in supposing that Wallace Armstrong was a Brian de Bois-Guilbert, a morose and evil-minded Templar, when in reality he was a Prince Charming!

And, while Laline slept peacefully above, dreaming of triumphal drives, of marvellous new hats, and unlimited bonbons and toys for her friends the children, Mr. Wallace Armstrong and her father, in the shabby smoke-

laden *salon* below, concocted between them the following letter for the delectation of Mr. Alexander Wallace in London,—

“MY DEAR UNCLE ALEC,—I can’t tell you how grateful I felt at receiving your letter and enclosure. Things were at a pretty bad pass for me and my poor Laline when your unexpected help arrived. I say unexpected, because I know quite well I didn’t deserve it; but you have given me another chance, and I mean to profit by it. Unfortunately, I fear that it will be quite a fortnight before my wife is fit to travel. You see, owing to my ill-luck, she has had a rough time of it lately, and she is young—very little more than a child, in fact—and unused to privations. Happily the doctor, whom I at once fetched in on receiving your kindly help, declares her constitution to be so good that with rest and nourishing food she will be herself again in a very short time. But he strongly recommends me to defer our journey for a fortnight or ten days, at the least. My wife’s maiden name was Laline Garth; her mother was a country rector’s daughter, and she has been most carefully trained in all womanly virtues, besides being an excellent little cook and housekeeper. She is wonderfully pretty, although very thin, poor child! She is not yet eighteen, and knows next to nothing of the world. In short, she is much, very much too good for me! I am not sending you the receipts you ask for, as at every moment I find some new thing we are in need of. Poor Laline and I haven’t even decent clothing yet. You may well say that under the circumstances it was madness to marry. I admit that perhaps it was; but such madness might well be inspired by such a girl as Laline. However, you must see her yourself and judge whether I have overpraised her, and whether among my many faults there

may not be counted unto me the saving virtue of knowing and loving a good woman when I see one.

“Always your affectionate nephew,

“WALLACE ARMSTRONG.”

“The difficulty now is,” observed Wallace, as he fastened the letter and addressed the envelope, after studying the contents with his mentor and friend, “to coach Miss Laline up in her part of the business. She seems somehow or other to possess a good deal of the awkward George Washington faculty. It will be a delicate matter to make her understand that you were an estimable clergyman, and that you are slumbering peaceful within the tomb.”

“The best plan,” advised the Captain, thoughtfully sipping at his cognac, “is to warn her that your uncle disapproves of all men connected with the turf, and to beg her to think of me as dead. Of course it is not a particularly pleasant experience for an affectionate father——”

“You are going to be paid for it!” Wallace interrupted, with his usual brutal directness. “It is not as though you were being asked to do anything for nothing!”

“And, by-the-bye, the sum was never fixed,” said Garth, resting his elbows on the table and scanning his prospective son-in-law sharply. “I must have all that clearly settled before I make that call with you on the Consul to-morrow morning.”

And here a difference of opinion was made manifest which seemed to threaten a serious breach between the worthy pair. Wallace Armstrong was inclined to dismiss his future father-in-law’s pretensions with the offer of a pound a week for life, or so long as he should retain his uncle’s favour. But Laline’s father had prepared a fixed scale of charges, from which nothing would induce him

to depart. He was making a great sacrifice, he declared ; he was relinquishing the love, companionship, and services of his only living relative, the pride of his heart, the legacy of his lost wife, and, out of sheer kindness and compassion for an old friend in difficulties, he was giving her in marriage to a man who he greatly feared would never make her truly happy.

“And if you should grow tired of her or become unkind to her, where would the poor child fly but to me, her old father, whom she has been forced to consider dead, but who, in his old age, must at least be sufficiently well off to provide her with a home when all else fails her !”

Tears stood in Captain Garth's eyes at his own eloquence, to which the younger man listened quite unmoved.

Two pounds a week, to be paid quarterly from the date of the marriage, three pounds a week when the income allowed by Alexander Wallace should be raised to five hundred a year ; and in the event of the banker dying and leaving a will favourable to Armstrong, an income for Garth of two hundred and fifty a year for the remainder of his life.

Until fully three o'clock the two men sat smoking and drinking cognac, while they quarrelled and haggled and finally cut cards over the settlement of the elder man's allowance in the event of his giving his daughter in marriage to the ex-forgery and family scapegrace before him. Not until the early sunrise forced its rays through the green shutters did they part, Randolph Garth having won all he demanded, and retiring to bed in high good humour ; while Wallace, disdainfully refusing the offer of a “shake-up” in the *salle-à-manger*, took his way down to the town and his hotel, cursing his future father-in-law for a swindling old reprobate, and his uncle for a narrow-minded old skinflint and imbecile.

The bargain was effected, a bargain which was to transfer the charge of a girl—young, beautiful, innocent, and friendless—from an old scamp to a young one. Garth and Armstrong had arranged their visit to the English Consul after they had renovated their toilets with the remainder of Alexander Wallace's gift; and at the Consul's office due notice was given of the marriage between Laline Garth, aged seventeen, daughter of Randolph Garth, an English subject residing in Boulogne, and Wallace Armstrong, aged twenty-six, of no occupation, whose present address was the Hôtel Mendon, Boulogne.

The one part of the affair which both men appeared to shirk was breaking to Laline the news that she was to be married in three weeks' time. Captain Garth in some measure paved the way for the announcement by taking her into his confidence concerning his state of hopeless insolvency, a thing he had never before done. Laline sat on the window-sill opposite to him in the little *salle-à-manger*, listening very quietly to the tale of his embarrassments, her soft dark eyes fixed intently on his face. She knew quite well, to her bitter mortification, the ever-increasing amounts they owed to Bénévoite and to the tradespeople, whose patience was in several cases altogether exhausted. She herself ate little but bread and butter, and drank nothing but water; but her father was extremely fond of the pleasures of the table, and invariably spent his last franc on wine or tempting *charcuterie* for his own delectation.

At the end of his recital of his debts and difficulties, which were real enough, Laline looked up suddenly.

"Papa," she said, "I have an idea. It's not the first time it has come into my mind, but I didn't like to speak of it to you before! Why shouldn't I go out and earn some money as a nursery governess? I speak French

as well as English, and I'm very fond of children. Then the money I earned would help to pay the bills."

"My dear child," her father began, rather nonplussed by her offer and by the earnestness of her tone, which taught him that this plan had become fixed in her mind, "do you look like a nursery governess? No one would engage you!"

"But Mr. Armstrong took me to Madame Caillard's shop yesterday and made me order a gray cashmere dress and be measured for it—a proper grown-up dress, touching the ground all around; he said he owed you money, and you had told him to buy me what I liked. You can't think how grown-up I shall look in it. And he told me to look in the hair-dresser's shops and notice how hair was dressed now, because I am growing too tall to wear my hair tied back with a ribbon. And I thought all the time of this nursery-governess idea, and was delighted, for I am longing to pay off the bills!"

"My dear little girl," put in her father, who had been listening with ill-concealed impatience, "if you had the least idea of a nursery-governess's duties and salary, you wouldn't entertain such a project for a moment. Nursery governesses are treated much worse than nurse-maids, are worked about thirteen hours a day, and paid from fifteen to twenty pounds a year. You, at your age, and without experience, could not hope to receive more than about twelve or fourteen pounds a year to start with, and you would be simply a nurse-girl, a servant, to take your orders from some vulgar and domineering nurse. Even if by a miracle you received the highest possible salary for such a situation, of what use would twenty pounds a year be to me? Five hundred francs, out of which your washing and clothes must come—and we owe about eight thousand francs, at least. No, no, my dear, it's not to be thought of! They must come

and carry off our poor little sticks, I suppose, as they have done before; and, if the very worst comes, they can put me in prison."

This conversation impressed and pained Laline deeply. She was greatly disappointed at the manner in which her father disparaged the possible help she was capable of affording him, and fell to wondering if there was no other way out of their difficulties. Down to the pier she wandered, late on a hot afternoon, to think over the subject that was troubling her. In appearance she was a little more sedate than she had been on her first introduction to Wallace Armstrong twelve days before. Her abundant hair was looped up, and her pink cotton frock, fashioned by her own hands, made some attempt to follow the lines of her slim figure. Wallace Armstrong had bought her a pair of long *Suède* gloves, of which she was extremely proud; so that, with these additions to her toilet, and her new black-lace hat with the rosebuds, she looked a very different being to "*la p'tite Gart*," with the flying hair and blue cotton blouse of a few days ago.

It was of Wallace the girl was thinking as she sat at the end of the pier, looking down into the shining green water. He seemed so rich and so kind; would he not help her father out of his difficulties, especially as he owed him money, on his own confession? She grew suddenly hot and unhappy when she thought of the many francs she had allowed Mr. Armstrong to waste over sweets and trifles to herself, while all the time there was such desperate need of money at home. Was it possible that her father was too proud to ask for help from his friend? But no; she at once dismissed that idea as unlikely. From her knowledge of her father she was not inclined to think that motives of delicacy would ever restrain him from borrowing money wherever he could. Laline was not in the least suspicious, but in her

dreamy, half-childish, half-womanly nature there lurked a strange intuition, which illuminated more than any reasoning powers could the natures of those around her.

Of the mercenary plot by which she was to be made the means of supplying her father and Wallace Armstrong with money for their vices and extravagances by her marriage with the latter, she had not the slightest suspicion. More than once she had been startled by the troubled and remorseful expression which crept into Mr. Armstrong's face when she raised her clear eyes to his. The young man had the saving grace to realise the paltry part he was playing, and for three days now he had avoided Laline, and had spent his time in bars and billiard-rooms of the town. He was fully determined to marry her, and to play the part of a kindly and affectionate brother until she could grow to love him. That she would do this sooner or later he took as a foregone conclusion, sharing, as he did with most men, the idea that any woman married to him was bound in time to love him. But meanwhile he did not care to meet the long trustful gaze of her soft dark eyes; and it was almost with a feeling of vexation that this afternoon, as he strolled down the pier, smoking a cigar, with his hands in his pockets and his straw hat tilted over his eyes to protect them from the sun, he found himself face to face with Laline, and saw the look of pleasure on her face as she recognised him.

"We haven't seen you for three days," she said, as he took a seat by her side. "I began to think you must have left Boulogne."

"Without saying 'Good-bye' to you? Was that likely?"

He was to be married to this girl in ten days—they were to pass their future lives together. And yet, seated here by her side in the sunshine, Wallace Armstrong,

ordinarily the most self-possessed of men, felt tongue-tied and abashed before her.

She was wonderfully pretty, but her very freshness and fairness became a reproach. He knew that he did not love her—knew, too, that her attraction for him lay chiefly in the utter dissimilarity between her and such women as he had heretofore chiefly noticed. The thought of his own unworthiness, while it failed to turn him from his purpose, served to render him morose and discontented. Laline saw his heavy black eyebrows contract into an ugly frown, and involuntarily drew back from him.

“Are you vexed with us in any way?” she asked, timidly. “With my father or myself, I mean?”

“Don’t talk of your father in the same breath with yourself?” he said, harshly. “I never think of you as in any way akin.”

Laline flushed painfully.

“Please remember,” she said, in a low voice, “that he is my father.”

“Do you love him for that, simply because you are told it is your duty?”

“I hope I do,” she answered very low. “But I cannot love him as I loved her—my mother.”

“Well, you will leave him some day, of course, and will find some one who will appreciate you better. Tell me, Miss Laline—have you any sweethearts in the town?”

She opened her dark eyes wide and laughed.

“Dear, no!” she answered, without the least hesitation. “How should I have time for such things? I am always busy, you know.”

“Spoiling your pretty hands with rough housework!”

“Ah, but I remember what you said the other day, and am going to take great care of my nails. And

mother always taught me to wear gloves in house-work."

"Don't you sometimes want to go back to England?"

Such a transfiguration took place in her face at the words! Her eyes shone, her cheeks flushed, her lips quivered.

"Ah!" she whispered, "I try not to think how much I want to go back there!"

"Would you thank any one who would take you?"

"As a governess, do you mean? But it would put papa to such expense if I were to leave him. And I think—I think there is something or some one that prevents his ever going back there at all."

"But if, for your sake, some one came forward and paid all your father's debts, and provided for him comfortably, and then sailed away with you in one of those nice white-funnelled steamers, and gave you a beautiful home in England, and surrounded you with everything that money and forethought could provide, and all for love of you, what would you say?"

"Why, who would do such a thing?"

"Some one who is very fond of you. Some one not very good, but who believes you could make him better by your sweet influence. Some one whose home is very lonely without a bright-faced Laline to look after things, and to sing about the house as I have heard you sing at the Rue Planché. Some one who loves you, Laline."

She stared into his face with wondering eyes which betrayed no self-consciousness.

"It sounds like a fairy-tale," she said.

"It is true, all the same. You are Cinderella, and I am a degenerate Fairy Prince, Laline!"

CHAPTER V.

THUS far had Wallace Armstrong proceeded in his unique love-making, when the lady he meant to wed in a few days' time disconcerted him by bursting into a hearty peal of laughter.

"Look at my hand," she said, pulling off her glove and showing a soft pink palm. "I had my fortune told several months ago, and I am not to fall in love until I am years older than I am now."

"Give me your hand," he said. "I know something of palmistry, too."

This statement was absolutely untrue. But, as he meant to leave no means untried to gain his end, and could see that the girl half believed in the fortune told by her hand, he resolved to practise on her childish credulity and superstition. In truth, he did not know one line from another, and could only decide that it was a nice soft girl's hand and eminently kissable.

"Show me your line of fate!" he said, peremptorily.

Laline eagerly pointed it out.

"As I suspected," he said, crumpling her hand together to emphasise the lines and looking absorbed in the study of them; "very early in your career you fall under the influence of a man of far stronger will than yours. His line of fate and yours run side by side, and only death can separate them!"

He spoke with much solemnity, but, more than his words, the magnetism of his touch affected Laline's sensitive nature. She shivered and turned pale.

"Can you really read that in my hand?" she asked, fearfully.

"Clearly. This man will love you, and you will not

be able to escape from him. Before you are seventeen you will be his wife."

"Oh, it's impossible!"

"Not at all. It's inevitable," he said—"written indelibly, for all who understand to read, here in the centre of your hand!"

And, as he spoke in slow impressive tones, he pointed his finger at random into her upturned palm. Looking up to see the effect of his prophecy, he found that she was leaning back in her seat, pale to the lips.

"What is the matter, child?" he exclaimed.

"You will laugh," she answered, in a low troubled tone, "but, as you held my hand and told me these things, something flashed into my head that you were right, and that there would be in my life a will against which I should fight in vain. The feeling terrified me, and I can't forget it!"

She raised her hands to her eyes, in which tears were shining, and pressed them close. Wallace Armstrong watched her, surprised and amused by what he considered her folly and weak-mindedness. In reality Laline was neither foolish nor specially weak-minded, only abnormally sensitive to influences to which a coarser nature would have been impervious. Looking into Wallace Armstrong's bold bright eyes, in the depths of which a scornful smile was lurking, the young girl seemed to read there, better than any fortune-teller could inform her, a will, selfish, resolute, and cruel, a nature attracted by and yet strongly antagonistic to her own, a personality she might grow to fear and even, it might be, to hate, but which she would never be able to regard with indifference.

Not in so many words did these convictions come upon her, but the sense of them grew as she gazed, her soft, near-sighted eyes, that had something of the wistful-

ness of a dumb animal, straining to realise what she saw.

At last Wallace broke the silence with a laugh.

"If we sit so still, staring at each other, people will think that I am mesmerising you," he said. "And, by-the-way, I believe I could."

"Please don't try!" she exclaimed, starting from her seat and pushing her hair from her forehead with a quick nervous gesture peculiar to her. "I must be getting back home now to see after papa's dinner."

"I will walk up with you," he said; "but you haven't yet told me whether you would like to go back to England, leaving your father comfortably settled here, provided for for life, and with all his bills paid."

"Why do you ask me such questions," she said, "when you know what you suggest is impossible?"

Then an inspiration seized Armstrong. In his pocket was another advance from his uncle to provide his niece Laline with medicines, new clothes, and other necessities. Wallace directed his steps to the Rue Royale.

"Come and look in this jeweller's shop-window," he said, "and tell me whether you are fond of trinkets."

"Very fond," she answered, "and I often look in here."

"Don't you want to have some of the pretty things?"

"I should, I dare say, if I had any money. But I have never had any jewelry except my dear mother's gold watch and chain. I hope I shall never part with that; but I don't wear it, because it is a great deal out of repair, and I can't afford to have it put right."

"Come inside and look at the things," he said. "Oh, it's all right," he added, seeing that she hesitated; "I have to buy something for myself!"

Once within the jeweller's shop, Wallace approached the attendant and held towards him Laline's hand.

"I want a very pretty ring for this young lady," he said in French. "Take off your glove, Laline."

In her astonishment she did not notice that, for the first time, he called her by her name without any prefix. Before she could do more than stammer a few words of inquiry, Wallace had deftly unbuttoned her glove and drawn it off, and the smiling attendant was showing her a trayful of rings.

"Here is one suitable to mademoiselle," the man suggested, showing her two tiny pearl hearts intertwined with a true-lover's knot.

"They are all too large!" Wallace complained. "No—I can't wait for one to be altered. Have you nothing smaller?"

A turquoise heart, surrounded by very small diamonds, proved so small that, once it was thrust upon the girl's finger, it could hardly be withdrawn. Wallace beat the price down to a hundred francs, and paid the money over the counter before Laline could do more than gasp an astonished protest.

"Now that you are formally engaged to me," he said, "I may as well order the wedding-ring, too."

This he proceeded to do, and, having at length discovered one of suitable smallness, he slipped the little parcel into his pocket, after paying for it, and left the shop, drawing Laline's arm through his in an authoritative manner as he did so.

"We will fetch your father," he said, "and we will all dine in the town together to celebrate our engagement."

"But, Mr. Armstrong," gasped Laline, "you must be in fun! Do you know that I am only sixteen?"

"Well, plenty of your friends over here get married at sixteen," he returned, "and my own mother was married before her seventeenth birthday!"

"But I don't want to marry you!"

"Not to go to England, to live in a big, beautiful house under my care and that of my old uncle, one of the worthiest and kindest old gentlemen alive, who is simply longing to welcome you as his daughter, and writes to me about you nearly every day?"

"Why, what can you mean?" she was beginning, when he drew from his pocket the letter from his uncle which he had received that morning, and, carefully folding down one portion, held it before her eyes.

The lines which the girl read ran thus:—

"Give my love to Laline, and tell her how much I look forward to welcoming her in my house. If she is like your description, she must indeed be a sweet and womanly young creature. Be sure to buy her all that she requires. I want my niece to enter her new home in the style that befits a lady of gentle birth and careful training."

"I can't understand it!" exclaimed Laline, bewildered. "You never told me that you had been writing about me to your uncle. And what does he mean by calling me his niece?"

"I told him I hoped to marry you very shortly."

"But you never even asked me!"

"You are too young to know your own mind, so it had to be made up for you," he said, laughing. "Now listen, Laline dear. As soon as I saw you it went to my heart to think that you were wasting your youth and beauty and refinement among such coarse and sordid surroundings. An atmosphere of unpaid bills and greasy cards and cognac was not suited for so fresh and sweet a flower. I know your father thoroughly well. I won't talk about him lest I should hurt your feelings. But he is not the man to be entrusted with the care of a girl like you; and, had your dear mother lived to see you

degraded into a half-starved kitchen drudge, friendless and neglected——”

“Don’t—ah, don’t!” cried Laline, passionately. “I can’t bear it!”

By that outburst he understood how keenly the girl felt her position, and how well-timed had been his allusion to her lost mother. At once he followed up his advantage.

“You want a home, my dear little girl,” he continued, drawing her hand through his arm and patting it affectionately. “This is not the place for you, and these are not the surroundings you ought to have. In my home you will enjoy what should be your position by right—that of an English lady! You will be petted and loved and cared for, you will have your own rooms and your own furniture, pocket-money to spend on pretty frocks and little presents for your friends, plenty of books to read, ample leisure and servants to wait upon you. My uncle, Alexander Wallace, is one of the richest bankers in London, and I am his favourite nephew and heir. You will have just what money you want now; and, later on, you will be an extremely rich woman, able to buy diamonds and horses and carriages and everything that you wish for in the world.”

She turned her wondering eyes upon him.

“And what makes you offer me all these things?” she asked, simply.

“Because I love you,” was the answer on the tip of his tongue; and he was angry with both her and himself because he could not speak it. Something in her absolute innocence and candour disarmed him. Almost for one moment he wished that he could tell her the whole truth in words of brutal frankness—“Because I am a ruined and dishonoured good-for-nothing, and my only hope of help consists in the immediate production of a wife at

my rich uncle's house! I have chosen you because you are very pretty, and too young and ignorant of the world to disbelieve my lying statements. Also because you have a mercenary scamp of a father, who has sold you to me for my wife for a consideration! I don't pretend to love you; much of your society would bore me to death. But I don't intend to have much of your society; and you are just the good, sweet-faced, refined sort of a little girl to get round my uncle, and coax money out of him for my extravagances!"

This is what Wallace Armstrong longed for one brief moment to say. He felt that he should despise himself less than if he were successful in deceiving her. But he was not in the habit of following good impulses when they stood in the way of his interests; and he slipped again into lying, and cleverly affecting a kindly and tender interest in the girl, until Rue Planche was reached and they entered the street together.

Then suddenly Laline, who had been listening to him in silence, stopped. She had something she wished to say to him before she entered the house. Her tones were low and earnest, and her eyes were grave.

"It is all very strange and wonderful," she said, "that you, who have known me so short a time, and your uncle, who has never seen me, should love me and want me to be with you always. I don't deserve it, and I don't understand it! There must be so many beautiful girls who would be much more suitable to you than I can be. And—I can't understand why, and it seems dreadfully ungrateful—but all the time you are talking I seem to hear whispered in my ear, 'Don't listen; he does not mean what he says!' And though you are so kind, and though I long to go back to England, and cannot bear the life here, I—I am afraid of you!"

Although she half whispered the last words, there

was no mistaking the startled look in her eyes. At that moment Armstrong positively disliked her, although her slight opposition only had the effect of making him more than ever determined to carry through his project.

What business had this ignorant child with intuitions warning her against him? Was it possible that under her demure and child-like exterior there lurked a spirit which would not easily be swayed and mastered by his own? Some hint of this flashed upon him as he watched her and listened to her faltering confession.

"You need never be afraid of me," he said, gently. "My ways are unpolished, I know. I have been knocking about in Australia for nearly five years, roughing it in the Bush and among miners. I wanted to see something of the world before marrying and settling down in England. But you shall cure my uncouth ways, and correct all my other defects, too, my dear Laline!"

Once in the house, and alone with Captain Garth in his den, Wallace's tone changed.

"For Heaven's sake give me a drop of brandy to wash out of my mouth the taste of all the lies I've been telling!" he cried, irritably. "It's my opinion, Garth, that little bread-and-butter prig of yours will be dear at the price!"

"She's a good child, and won't give you any trouble," Laline's father assured him, soothingly. "Have you broached the subject of the marriage to her yet?"

"Your fingers are itching to touch the two 'quid' a week, I see!" sneered Armstrong, as he tossed off a glass of neat cognac. "Oh, it's safe enough! She's delighted at the idea, which is more than I am. However, it's got to be gone through with. Unluckily, I've promised to take her and you to dine with me in the town this evening. Can't we put her off?"

Garth shook his head dubiously.

"Better not," he said. "If she's left alone, she'll get thinking—she's a great one for thinking and dreaming and fancying. Now that the thing's settled, she had better not be left alone this evening."

"As you like. But, mind, I've had enough of nursery courtship; and she mustn't expect to see much of me during the next few days. On the third, as soon as the ceremony is over, we will cross by the midday boat; and Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Armstrong will proceed to London and dine on fat veal, *au Fils Prodigue*! It will be time enough to tell Laline the day when her frocks are ready."

"Here's to your happy married life!" observed Garth, pouring himself out some brandy. "I hope you'll be kind to her, Armstrong, when I am not by to look after her!"

Up-stairs in her own room, Laline was kneeling before her little dressing-table of painted deal, gazing earnestly at her dead mother's portrait.

"Mother," she murmured, with tears in her eyes, "if you could only speak to me and advise me! Is it your voice which seems to tell me not to listen to Mr. Armstrong? And yet he seems so kind, and he is going to be so good and generous to papa! Such a fairy prince to such a poor little penniless Cinderella! How good it is of him to be so sorry for me—to sympathise with me so deeply about losing you, and to understand how much it would hurt you to know just how things have been since you left me! I remember how you once said to me, while I sat reading at your feet and you smoothed my hair, 'I hope and pray that my little girl may some day marry a good man, who will love her for herself, as a woman should be loved!' I have not remembered that speech until to-day. I wanted to wait for years before I

thought of love and marriage for myself. There is no one to help me and advise me. Oh, mother, if you could only come back for one moment and tell me what to do!"

But the wills of two unscrupulous men were warring against the vague intuitions of an inexperienced girl; and every day the net was drawn more closely about Laline's feet, until the dawn of the thirtieth of August, her wedding-morning.

CHAPTER VI.

"HAPPY is the bride the sun shines on!"

Laline had heard the words somewhere, and remembered them as she woke very early on the thirtieth of August and saw the rain pouring in a steady flood upon the sun-dried earth.

She stood looking out on the mean little back street of St. Denis, commanded by her bedroom window. What outlook would there be from the windows of her new home? she wondered. Old Mr. Wallace's house was vast and dreary, situated over his banking-establishment in the Strand, London; from his nephew's brief description it was a paradise of luxury and comfort. Laline was all agog with excitement. She did not want to marry Wallace Armstrong; she was fascinated by and yet afraid of him. But she had become so convinced of his disinterested goodness to her, and she was so troubled by her father's debts and difficulties, that it seemed wicked to refuse his offer. And yet she had not said "Yes;" her "Yes" had been taken for granted, her father had effusively blessed her as the means of delivering him from his embarrassments, and Bénévoite and her

few acquaintances could hardly shower enough congratulations upon her for her unique good fortune, which clearly astonished them.

“So rich a man, so handsome, so distinguished-looking, the heir to a millionaire, and nothing would content him but marrying *la p'tite Gart*! It was certainly very wonderful, although she had greatly improved in appearance since she had taken to long frocks and put her hair up.”

Such were among the neighbours' comments; and every one seemed to envy Laline's good fortune. And yet this little beggar-maid could not subdue a secret fear of her King Cophetua; and as she stood now, looking very fair and saint-like in her long, white gown, with her bright hair floating about her shoulders, and the wistful look of her hazel eyes, a little quiver of dread passed over her as she thought of that unknown future to which the flying minutes were leading her.

Her wedding-dress, which was also to be her travelling-costume, lay on the bed, a plain blue serge of perfect fit and cut, in which she looked very tall and slim, a neat little blue straw hat, and a tweed travelling-cape. Laline had very little more real notion of love or of the responsibilities of a wife than the little Bertins next door; but her heart beat fast as she finished dressing and heard her future husband's voice as he entered the hall below.

“Don't I look grown-up?” she asked, as she ran downstairs to greet him.

Wallace was in a bad temper that morning, having sat up until four o'clock losing money at cards. He kissed Laline's cheek without much effusion.

“I hope you are going to do your hair up,” he observed. “You look about twelve with all that about your shoulders!”

"I haven't finished dressing it. It's all got to be coiled and twisted and pinned away. But I thought you would like to see me in my new gown."

"Well, don't waste time dressing! We have to be at the Consul's at ten; and the boat leaves at ten minutes past two o'clock. It's a beastly morning; I've got wet through coming over from the hotel!"

An hour later the three set forth in a closed *fiacre*, accompanied by an elderly sporting friend of Captain Garth, to whom the latter owed a good deal of money, and who went ostensibly as a witness, but in reality to make sure that Miss Garth's marriage with Alexander Wallace's nephew was not a creation of his friend and debtor's facile brain.

It was by no means a festive party. The bridegroom was morose and sullen, and did not once glance at the poor little bride, who sat in silence facing him, with a startled look in her eyes. Captain Garth was restless and voluble, striving, by his forced cheerfulness, to impart something like suitable brightness to the occasion; his friend Mr. Mitcham endeavoured to pay compliments to Laline, who received his well-meant efforts with a dreamy wonder that was not encouraging; the cab splashed through the muddy streets, the rain beat upon the windows, and at every yard traversed Laline's spirits sank to a low ebb, and her mind became more and more overshadowed by dismal forebodings of the future in store for her.

The Consul, a grey-haired fussy man, with a preoccupied manner, made short work of the ceremony; and to Laline, whose ideas of weddings were chiefly gained from those she had witnessed in the village church in Westmoreland, there was something bald and unmeaning in the total absence of any religious ceremony, something that savoured of a bargain made across a counter,

and not of a holy sacrament to be honoured throughout a lifetime.

A few words spoken by an elderly gentleman in ordinary attire in the presence of his secretary, his clerk, Garth, Armstrong, Mitcham, and Laline, in a bare-looking office, a few statements made by a man and a woman, a few signatures and the payment of certain fees, and Laline Garth had become Laline Armstrong, wife of the tall, frowning young man who stood facing her with an aching head which had not yet recovered from the gambling and brandy-drinking of the preceding evening.

It was all startling, shocking, and painful to Laline. To the last they had not told her that hers was to be solely a civil marriage; to the last she had hoped that a clergyman might bless her in a holier name before she started on her new life. She was half a child still, but woman enough to feel deeply the inadequacy of such a ceremony as had just taken place to satisfy the requirements of her mind.

Almost as soon as the little party left the Consular residence the bridegroom announced his intention of going to his hotel, "to put his things together," a proposition which his father-in-law urgently combated.

"It isn't half-past ten yet!" growled Armstrong. "That Consul-fellow fixed the ceremony so infernally early! What in the world can one do with oneself in the Rue Planché on a pouring wet day like this?"

"There are plenty of little things to talk over," said Garth, slipping his arm through that of his son-in-law. "We have to drink success to your married life too," he added, insinuatingly.

"In that filthy brandy of yours? There's one good thing about going back to England, one can get something fit to drink there!"

With such bad grace Armstrong agreed to accompany his bride and her father home. Captain Garth was fully determined to keep Wallace securely under his eye until he saw the newly-married pair safely on board the boat bound for England. He had had some experience of the young man's moods, and knew that he was quite capable of getting extremely intoxicated in the town out of mere bravado, and in that condition presenting himself at the boat, or even, at the worst, of forgetting that appointment altogether.

"Poor little girl! She's caught a Tartar!" was Mitcham's mental comment, as he took leave of the bridal party, who, in another *fiacre*, splashed their way back to the High Town.

Here the little bride was dismissed to her room, to complete her packing. But, most unluckily for the plans of Messrs. Armstrong and Garth, it so chanced that almost as soon as Laline arrived up-stairs, and before she had even removed her hat, she remembered that she had left her keys in the *salle-à-manger* below, and forthwith she descended in search of them.

Nell the cat and her kitten were playing on the floor of the *salle*, and the little bride slipped on her knees beside them to bid them an affectionate and tearful farewell. Nell's kitten had an untidy habit of dragging any plaything it could find from one room to another about the house; as she caressed it, Laline remembered that her three keys on a little piece of string were among the kitten's favourite toys, which might account for the fact that they were at this present moment nowhere to be found.

On consulting Bénoîte, the latter declared that she had seen the "*le p'tit chat*" amusing itself with some keys on the floor of the *salon* that morning; but, as she never meddled with anything of Monsieur's, she had not res-

cued them. Clearly the *salon* was the place to search for the missing keys, and with that idea Laline turned the handle of her father's den.

The two men were sitting by Garth's desk with their heads bent over a paper; close at hand stood the cognac, a syphon, and two well-filled glasses. They seemed absorbed in the contents of the paper before them, and did not hear Laline's timid turning of the handle of the door. Before, however, she had opened it sufficiently wide to enable her to enter, some words, loudly spoken in her bridegroom's voice, arrested her attention, and made her suddenly stop as though turned to stone.

"You've only got to alter the date of the certificate from the thirtieth of August to the thirtieth of July, and the thing is done. I wrote to my uncle that I was married and that my wife was starving just twenty-four days ago. I didn't say how long I'd been married; and, as I landed at Marseilles in the middle of July on my way to Paris, I should have had plenty of time to get on here and through the ceremony by the thirtieth. Of course, Laline doesn't look as if she were starving, though I think you've kept her pretty short in the matter of food. But, if she's only sea-sick, she may look woe-begone enough for the character!"

"Your difficulty will be," said Garth, "to persuade her to back you up in those few little necessary lies. For one thing, I have stated her age as seventeen; for another, she must be made to understand that she's been married a month, and has been starving in Boulogne for some days. But your toughest job will be to induce her to state that she's the orphan daughter of a clergyman, and that she met you coming home from Australia. It's almost a pity to have left all these very important details to the last moment."

"It's all the fault of that humbugging training of

hers," growled Armstrong. "But I'm not going to let any whimpering school-girl spoil my prospects. Laline's my wife, and she's got to obey me. I shall impress upon her that my uncle, who is very particular, would never forgive me for marrying the daughter of such a man as you, ex-keeper of a gambling-club, where I got fleeced and ruined five years ago,—a man who daren't show his face in England; and I shall assure her that I invented this story of a dead parson-father in order to spare her natural feelings."

"Stop a bit!" exclaimed Garth, whose flesh-tints had deepened from crimson to purple while Armstrong was speaking. "I draw the line at that. It's bad enough to be deprived of my daughter's companionship; but I won't have her mind poisoned against me; understand that! You can tell her that I am connected with the turf, as I suggested before, and that your uncle has a Puritanical horror of horse-racing. But I won't have my memory blackened in the mind of the only kith-and-kin I have in the world!"

"I shall arrange it as I said!" said Armstrong obstinately, while he helped himself to more brandy. "You've sold me your daughter for a hundred a year, to be afterwards raised on two separate occasions. You wanted money, and so did I. Both of us were stone-broke. I wrote to my uncle, pretending I had a starving wife; he took me at my word, and promised to forgive me and provide for me if I would produce her. It was necessary to find a wife immediately, and desirable that she should be too young or too silly to ask questions. I settled on your daughter. The bargain was struck, and she passed from your keeping to mine, having filled her very proper mission of providing us both with money. But, now that she is mine, and I have saddled myself with a lanky, half-fledged school-girl, you have no more part in her,

and I shall speak to her of you or of anybody else in just what terms I choose!"

"My daughter is my daughter until she leaves my roof, at least!" cried Garth, his patience suddenly deserting him. "I'm sick of your bullying, blustering, hectoring ways! The settlement as to my future income is all signed and sealed and witnessed, and what is to prevent me from informing Laline of your true character before she leaves this house? What authority would you exercise over her if I told her your record? A gambler, a drunkard, a bully, and a forger, who has only escaped a felon's cell by the leniency of an uncle, who shipped him off to Australia in order to get rid of him!"

Captain Garth rose while he spoke, and made as though he were approaching the door, when, suddenly, Armstrong sprang from his seat with a smothered oath, and caught him roughly by the shoulder. Just for one moment Laline, gazing with distended eyes through the crack of the door, saw them, the faces of both excited and angry—Garth's with a red rage of indignation, and Armstrong's with a white cruelty which was infinitely more dangerous. Then, as the two men struggled, the sound of scuffling commenced, drowning Laline's flying footsteps, and enabling her to gain the staircase and her own apartment unseen and unheard.

One only idea filled her mind—to escape at that instant from both these men; and the strange lucidity of thought which comes to some emotional natures at moments of high tension seemed suddenly to make clear to her ways and means.

It was only a few minutes past eleven; she had heard the church-clocks chime the hour while she listened at the *salon* door. The Folkestone boat did not leave until ten minutes past two; if Armstrong and her father had their luncheon served to them at twelve, they would not think

of her until past one. She would tell Bénéôte that she was going to call upon some friends before leaving Boulogne, and that she would be back in time for the boat; she would lock her bedroom-door and throw away the key in order to still further delay pursuit. But then—where was she to go?

All her thoughts and wishes pointed to England. And yet where in her native country was she to make her home until she could find means to earn her own living, as she had so long desired to?

Her uncle, the clergyman in Sussex, had held no communication with his sister since her marriage with Randolph Garth, and only as a last resource could Laline entertain the idea of seeking shelter under his roof. But there was a much-loved school-friend of the late Mrs. Garth, a widow named Melville, whose constant and affectionate letters had been much looked forward to by the little household in the Westmoreland village. Her messages to her old friend's little daughter had been of the kindest description. She kept a girls'-school in Norwood, and Laline remembered her address; but since her arrival in Boulogne she had had no communication with Mrs. Melville, who, Laline realised, would be shocked by the Bohemian mode of life in the Rue Planché.

Laline had not seen this lady since she was a very little child; but she remembered her as kind, and believed that, for her dead mother's sake, Mrs. Melville might be induced to help her, and to Mrs. Melville's protection Laline resolved to fly.

There was no time to be lost indeed. The girl could hear men's voices in angry discussion below. England must be reached as speedily as possible; and yet to travel by the Folkestone boat was clearly out of the question. The Calais route was shorter, if Laline could only get to Calais; and by that journey she would

arrive in London more than hour before her pursuers, should they even guess that she had escaped thither.

Providentially, she recalled the fact that the train from Paris to Calais stopped at Boulogne for a few minutes before proceeding on its journey at a quarter to twelve o'clock. Laline's mind was at once made up; and in less time than it takes to tell it she had seized her cloak and gloves, locked her bedroom-door, slipped the key in her pocket, and astonished Bénéôte by darting into the kitchen and whispering a hurried message in her ear before leaving the house by the way into the Rue St. Denis.

Her entire worldly wealth consisted of one franc and fifty centimes; but her father's chronic impecuniosity had taught Laline the method by which the poor and improvident raise money, and, with a beating heart and a hot flush on her cheek, Laline stopped on her way to the station to change the two rings which Armstrong had given her, the turquoise and diamond engagement-ring, the hated wedding-ring, together with her much-loved mother's watch and chain, for money wherewith to buy her freedom.

For it seemed to Laline that she would be free of the horrible, loveless bargain which her marriage had been could she but tear from her finger the gold circlet which Wallace Armstrong had an hour ago placed there, could she but put the sea between herself and him, and, losing herself in the vastness of London, change her name and live out her life away from him and his evil influence.

Her heart was full of the most passionate indignation against both him and her father; of the latter, indeed, she hardly dared to think, so deeply did she resent his treatment of her; but of Armstrong she thought with a growing fear and horror, which dwelt upon the brutality of his speeches and the cruelty of his expression, until

he seemed to her to be scarcely human. Rather death than a return to the care of either of those men! Terror lent wings to her feet; until, breathless, panting, but with a great sigh of relief, she jumped into the already moving train for Calais.

Fortune favoured the runaway. The passage was smooth enough under a gray, lowering sky, and Laline's heart leaped within her at sight of the white cliffs of her native land in the afternoon. Before six o'clock on that eventful day the Dover train steamed into Charing-Cross Station, and Laline Armstrong stepped out upon the platform, a slim, girlish figure, alone and friendless in the great city of London.

CHAPTER VII.

ON a winter afternoon in London, rather more than four years after Laline's flight from Boulogne, a beautiful young woman stood in the ground-floor sitting-room of a London lodging-house, poring over the advertisements headed "Wanted" in a daily paper.

To the owner of the house, who was a relative of her old friend Mrs. Melville, of Norwood, this young lady was known as Miss Lina Grahame; but the reader has already made her acquaintance as Laline Garth, who, on a certain rainy morning in Boulogne, became the bride of Wallace Armstrong.

For four years Laline had earned her living in the girls'-school kept by her mother's old schoolfellow—four well-occupied uneventful years, spent in the schoolroom, the dormitory, the Crystal Palace, and walks in the neighbourhood of Norwood, looking after the younger pupils, teaching French to the elder ones, preparing and

correcting lessons and studying for examinations, with the duties of every hour in the day well-defined and clear, a healthy but monotonous life of gray routine and unchangeable discipline.

And now, at the age of forty-two, Mrs. Melville, Laline's employer and friend, had been carried off to Canada by a cousin and old sweetheart, who, finding himself at the age of forty-five a well-to-do widower, with four young children, had bethought him of that eminent instructress of youth, his widowed cousin, and in a very practical letter had proposed to come over to England, marry her, and take her back with him to Canada to look after his household and his children.

Such an offer, in the eyes of a buxom business-like woman of forty-two, was too advantageous to be refused. Mrs. Melville thought so; and, after speedily disposing of her house and selling the scholastic good-will and name to her senior teacher, she married her cousin with the utmost composure, and dutifully accompanied him to his Canadian home in order to undertake the mental and moral education of her four step-children.

To her junior governess, Miss Lina Grahame, Mrs. Melville gave on parting a travelling-clock, an ivory-bound prayer-book, and some excellent advice.

"I have only one fault to find with you, my dear," she had said, kindly—"you are too pretty. It grew to be quite awkward sending away the foreign masters because they made themselves silly about you, and the pupils noticed it. No—I don't tell you to cut your hair off or to wear blue spectacles; but I do say that I am not surprised that Miss Finch doesn't want to keep you on with the school, although you have such nice ways with the children and such a good French accent. I have myself been a very successful teacher—but then I have always been plain. Now, although it goes against the

grain to say it, for a girl with your appearance I suppose that the most desirable profession is marriage."

Laline had suddenly flushed at Mrs. Melville's words, and then burst into a peal of laughter.

"Now, Mrs. Melville," she had cried, "that comes very oddly from you, who are just marrying for the second time! And I have often told you that it is useless to talk like that to me, as I shall never marry."

This parting conversation recurred to Laline as she turned over the advertisement-pages of the papers on this wintry afternoon in search of a suitable scholastic engagement.

"I wonder," she reflected, "that all those years I never let out that I was really married in talking to Mrs. Melville. I often felt strongly tempted to tell her, but that it seemed impossible that just a visit to a Consul's house, and some mumbled words, and a ring which I never wore, can mean a tie for life. It is not as if it had been in a church, and I had gone through a proper religious ceremony, with some kindly-faced clergyman to utter the beautiful words I know. I should have held that to be binding; but as to this, it all seems now like an incident in a half-forgotten dream. And yet I suppose that, if Wallace Armstrong is not dead, I really am his wife, and shall be as long as he and I both live. Yet if he saw me now he would not know me, and I think I should hardly recognise him. It seems absurd. Luckily I have never been the least little bit in love, and do not mean to be, except in day-dreams and with wholly imaginary persons. I never felt anything, I know, when Monsieur Marchand and Herr Pfeiffer got sentimental about me. I suppose they behaved like that just because I was what Mrs. Melville called pretty. She thinks my looks will stand in my way; she would have been amused at my impudence in answering

yesterday this advertisement, which I see is inserted again to-day."

And, with her soft eyes sparkling with fun, Laline read over the somewhat remarkable insertion to which she had replied.

"Wanted, as companion and amanuensis to a lady, a well-educated young girl, refined and beautiful, of high character and gentle birth. Apply by letter, enclosing photograph, to Occult, Box 72,631, advertisement-office, *Daily Post*."

"Occult, whoever she may be, must be rather mad," Laline decided. "But I haven't a doubt that she will get dozens of answers. I wonder what she is like? There is an originality about the advertisement which is fascinating; and to be a companion and amanuensis sounds much nicer and more vague than to be teacher in a school."

At that identical moment the repeated double-knock of a telegraph-boy resounded through the hall. Then came a tap at the door of Laline's sitting-room, and a slatternly little servant entered and presented a telegram addressed to "Miss Grahame."

The message ran thus:—

"*Re* Occult's advertisement. Come at once to 21, Queen Mary Crescent, Kensington. Photograph and letter approved."

It was with excitement not unmingled with a curious sense of trepidation that Laline got out of a hansom cab, the driver of which had had considerable trouble in discovering the narrow *cul-de-sac* turning which led to St. Mary's Crescent—a row of old-fashioned houses,

mellowed by age and smoke to a deep crimson colour. Near them waved the tall trees of Kensington Gardens, and before their narrow green-painted doors two steps led to a walk three feet wide and a stone-paved yard, over which the wheels of Laline's cab clattered noisily, awakening the protests of more than one pet-dog from the quiet houses into which the noise from the busy thoroughfare of the High Street came only as a distant and soothing murmur.

As Laline laid her hand on the knocker of number seven, she became suddenly embarrassed as to the name of its occupant. Could she ask for Miss or Mrs. Occult?

"I have come in answer to a telegram about an advertisement," she finally announced, as the door was opened by a neatly-dressed parlour-maid, and Laline found herself in a very small square hall, dimly lighted by an oil-lamp, and furnished with tapestry-hangings and two oak settles of old-fashioned make.

The servant opened the door of a room to the right of the entrance, and asked the visitor to step inside. Almost at the same moment a young lady darted down the staircase into the hall, so swiftly and suddenly as to suggest the idea that she had been on the watch for the visitor, and joined Laline at the door of the room into which she was being shown.

"It is my aunt who has sent for you," the new-comer whispered confidentially to Laline, after carefully closing the door behind her; "and I do hope she will engage you! The moment I saw your face at the door I took such a fancy to you!"

The speaker was a girl of apparently Laline's own age, well developed, and of medium height, with curiously lithe feline movements. Her dress, of yellow-green serge, was loosely draped about her and caught here and there by silver buckles, her skin was white as

paper and framed in an untidy halo of silky yellow-red hair. Regular features, oddly-gleaming green-gray eyes under pale-yellow lashes, and narrow curved red lips completed an *ensemble* which to Laline was at once repellent and attractive.

"If this was the niece, what would the aunt be?" she asked herself, fascinated by the strange brightness of the girl's eyes. But, as Laline gazed, her new acquaintance suddenly lowered her white eyelids, and the trick struck the other as affected and insincere.

The same cat-like quality which characterised her movements was shown also in her voice, which was marked by a purring and caressing intonation.

"Do you know who my aunt is?" she asked.

And then, as Laline shook her head, the red-haired girl enunciated her aunt's name with much impressiveness.

"She is Mrs. Vandeleur—Mrs. Sibyl Vandeleur."

The name meant nothing to Laline, but she saw that the red-haired girl expected her to be struck by it, and she hastened to explain her unmoved attitude.

"I know nothing of London celebrities," she said; "I have not lived in London since I was a child."

"Oh, that accounts for your not having heard of her!" said the other, evidently disappointed. "My aunt is extremely well known; and I should have thought that, to any one who reads the papers——"

"But I don't read the papers!" put in Laline. "I have never had time."

The other girl drew back her head, and appeared to be studying her.

"How delightful!" she murmured, sympathetically. "I should like to be like that—it leaves so many things to be found out. You have lived all your life at Norwood, haven't you?"

The question was asked with such point-blank directness, but, at the same time, with such an appearance of spontaneous simplicity, that Laline was a little taken aback. With the strange intuition which she had retained from her childish days, she already distrusted the apparent friendliness of this picturesque stranger, and she accordingly framed her answer in vague and reserved tones.

"I have lived for a part of my life at Norwood," she answered.

"At a girls'-school? That must be a dull life, but nice and restful for the nerves. Have you any nerves? This house is the worst possible place for you if you have."

The last words were uttered in a very low voice, after a quick glance round the room.

"I don't think I am particularly nervous," Laline replied.

"But you look nervous," remarked the red-haired girl. "Those delicate faces, with pale-pink skins and dark eyes and auburn hair, are always the nervous ones. Now I am colourless and lymphatic, so this house doesn't hurt me!"

"And why is it likely to hurt me?" inquired Laline, calmly.

"Hush—don't talk so loudly! I liked your face so much that I thought I ought to speak to you just to put you on your guard!"

She glanced round her again, and, drawing nearer to Laline, breathed rather than spoke in her ear—

"Are you afraid of ghosts?"

Before Laline could answer, a thin but silvery voice broke upon the silence, and caused the red-haired girl to start guiltily from her companion's side.

"Go to your room, Clare—I wish to speak to Miss Grahame alone!"

Without a word Clare stole away, leaving Laline *tête-à-tête* with a lady whom she rightly judged to be "Occult," otherwise Mrs. Sibyl Vandeleur.

Standing before the picturesque background of dark-red plush curtains which draped the folding-doors through which she had entered, Mrs. Vandeleur appeared to Laline one of the most picturesque figures she had ever seen. Rather under the medium height, and of extreme thinness and fragility, she looked more like a spirit than a woman, an effect heightened by her powdered hair, dressed loosely and high upon her head, her piercing, dark eyes, ivory-white skin, and the soft silvery-gray draperies swathed round her slender form. In her thin hand she held a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, the handle of which was thickly encrusted with turquoise and garnets in an old-fashioned gold setting, and through these she peered in a bird-like manner at Laline, with her head poised a little on one side.

"What is your name," she asked—"your full name, given you at baptism?"

The terms of the question rather disconcerted Laline, and there was a perceptible hesitation in her voice as she replied—

"I am called Lina Grahame."

"That is not your real name!"

"It is the one by which I am known."

"That means," said Mrs. Vandeleur, putting down her eyeglasses and tapping her thin fingers with them, "that you have reasons for concealing your identity?"

"I had at one time, Mrs. Vandeleur, and I have now got used to the names of Lina Grahame, to which I have some right!"

"The surname was a family name?"

"Yes!"

Grahame was indeed the maiden name of Laline's

mother, and the girl was startled and interested by Mrs. Vandeleur's surmise.

"I was often called Lina as a child," she added, quickly, to forestall Mrs. Vandeleur's interrogatories.

"The mystery concerns a man," said the little lady in gray, peering again at Laline through her gold-rimmed glasses. "And yet your face—— Take off your glove—no, the left hand—and let me look at your lines!"

Laline obeyed. As she did so, with startling distinctness there flashed back upon her memory a similar scene in which she had taken part more than four years ago. In her mind's eye she saw it all again—the hot stirless afternoon in mid-August, the sun's rays shining over a long stretch of gleaming sand and peeping under the straw hat-brim of a big black-haired Englishman with insolent, bright blue eyes. By his side sat a thin overgrown girl of sixteen, listening in rapt silence while he told her fortune by the lines of her hand, and prophesied that all her life through she would be haunted by the influence of a stronger will than hers, and that, before the age of seventeen, she would marry a man who would never cease to dominate her life until death should part them.

Half dreamily, with her thoughts elsewhere, she began to listen while Mrs. Vandeleur, in a level, monotonous voice, as though speaking words dictated to her rather than spontaneous utterances, began to repeat aloud what she professed to read in Laline's hand.

"Early in your life," she murmured, "you were subjected to strangely-opposing influences. Your career has been unlike that of girls of your age. Let me look at your eyes; the light is bad, and I am nearsighted, but, before I see them, I will tell you their colour—it will be that of the darkest hazel-nut, a mossy green, with red-

brown lights here and there. Do you dream much and vividly?"

"Constantly. And by day as well as by night, I am ashamed to say!" Laline answered, laughing. "I am a born dreamer."

"You are just the person I want!" exclaimed Mrs. Vandeleur, a touch of restless excitement showing itself in her voice and manner. "My niece Clare cannot dream. A dreamer—a day-dreamer—must have a pure white soul, must be untouched by the world, and far above all monetary considerations. What is your age? I could find out by your hands, but I know that I can believe your words."

"I was twenty last August."

"You look younger; you have not yet lost your child-mind. You have never been in love—oh, I know you haven't—you need not tell me!"

"I have certainly never been in love with any one alive."

"That means that you have had ideals, and have loved them in dreams and waking fancies?"

"Sometimes."

"Keep your ideals for your dreams, child, and love them there. In real life you will never meet them. There is but little ideality in end-of-the-century Englishmen. We read the old fairy-tale of the Briar-Rose Princess, and are glad that she awakes at the Prince's kiss. But she was much happier dreaming. In her dreams he and she would never grow old, would never fall sick, would never tire of loving, would never die: autumn winds would never blow down summer leaves, or spring flowers wither at the touch of frost. Life is full of sadness, full of disillusion! Only in dreams and fancies can true happiness be found!"

Something in the sadness of Mrs. Vandeleur's sweet

voice brought the tears to Laline's eyes. This woman, with her fairy-like appearance and disconnected talk, her pretensions to sibylline magic, her ready intuition, quick observation, and random guesses at truths she could not know, possessed an undeniable fascination, to which older and more experienced brains than Laline's were wont to succumb. The girl felt that she had met a friend, and one wholly in sympathy with an especial side of her nature; and Mrs. Vandeleur, for her part, had discovered just such a personality as she required, sensitive, impressionable, yet maidenly, reserved, and proud.

"You will make your home here with me, of course," she said, patting Laline's hand. "Bring your things here directly; your room has been waiting for you a long time. Fifty pounds a year and all your expenses. You won't find it too much, for I shall want you always to be picturesquely dressed; but come to me when you require more, and you shall have it. No—I ask no references. Your face and your hand are sufficient references for me. I shall study your hand when I mean to know more. One thing I have learned from it already: in the troubled time before you you will want me as a friend—you will come to me for counsel, and I will give it."

CHAPTER VIII.

LALINE dined that evening with Clare Cavan, Mrs. Vandeleur's niece.

"Aunt Cissy never eats before people," the latter explained. "She thinks it's a great pity we have to eat at all. She's a dear sweet thing, and I quite agree with her that eating is very mundane; but we can't all of us live on air. Aunt Cissy tries to, but even she can't quite

succeed. I call her Aunt Cissy when we are alone because her real name is Cecilia. But since she became celebrated she has taken the name of 'Sibyl,' which is more suggestive of mystery, you know."

There was a veiled sneer in the words which made Laline glance quickly across the table at Clare's face. But Miss Cavan was eating her dinner with a placid countenance untouched by sarcasm, her light-yellow eyelashes veiling her eyes.

"I am perfectly beside myself with delight that aunt has chosen you!" Clare presently remarked. "You have no idea what a number of answers she had to her advertisement. That was through putting in the word 'beautiful.' Such old hags sent their photographs, too, and answers and pictures are still pouring in by every post. Did Aunt Cecilia tell you anything about the nature of your duties?"

"No."

"That is just like her! She is always so vague. Perhaps, when you know all about this house, you won't stay. It's rather uncanny. The only servants aunt can keep are an old Scotch cook, who doesn't know what nerves mean, and the maid who opened the door to you. She stays because she's afraid to run away."

"Afraid?"

"Yes. Aunt Cecilia is a Devonshire woman, and can put a wish upon any one she's vexed with. She leaves the most valuable things about; but though at one time she was always changing her parlour-maids, no one has ever dared to steal anything from her private sitting-room up-stairs. You'll understand why when you've once been inside it."

Clare's white face grew, if possible, a shade whiter as she spoke, lowering her voice to a very subdued key.

"Are you afraid of your aunt too?" Laline asked.

Clare shivered and glanced towards the door.

"Horribly!" she replied, in a very low voice. Then she gave a little nervous laugh. "It sounds absurd to you, doesn't it? But Aunt Cecilia is a wonderful woman! I am an orphan, and she was my mother's younger sister. My mother often told me how Cissy used to terrify her as a child by prophesying things. Well, she has cultivated her powers in that direction until she almost forgets she has a body at all; she is all mind and spirit and that sort of thing, you know! Won't you have some more apple-pie? Aunt Cissy's cook makes such capital pastry, it's a pity to neglect it! As I was saying, my aunt, who isn't forty yet, in spite of her powdered hair, went in for spiritualism and all that sort of thing quite early. She was the seventh child of a Scotchwoman and a Devonshire man, and both my grandparents were dreadfully superstitious. Aunt Cissy was very pretty, my mother told me, in a sort of ethereal way—a figure like yours, I should say, only not so tall and a little thinner—you are so charmingly slender that I feel a great fat thing beside you!"

"I think you have a beautiful figure!" said Laline, simply.

"Oh, it's very sweet of you; but there are too many curves about me! I know I must appear very plump and earthly in Aunt Cissy's eyes. Men like curves, I know; but then I don't care about pleasing men a little bit—they simply bore me when they try to make love to me! Do you feel the same about them?"

"I don't know. No man has ever tried to make love to me."

And then Laline, although she had answered with perfect truthfulness, suddenly blushed, remembering that she was actually a married woman. Clare noted the blush and decided that her new friend was lying.

"I am so fond of women," she proceeded, with apparent enthusiasm. "Men are all very well in their way—I don't mind talking to them for a few minutes; but for a friend, a companion, a confidant, give me a woman. You and I ought to get on splendidly together. We are both orphans—at least, I am an orphan—and your parents are dead, are they not?"

Again Laline flushed deeply.

In truth she had neither seen nor heard anything of her father since that fateful thirtieth of August more than four years ago. But she was by no means inclined to confide in Miss Cavan, whom she admired but instinctively mistrusted; and she therefore contented herself by stating that her mother was dead, and that she had not seen her father for some years.

"How sad!" cooed Clare. "Well, to go back to Aunt Cissy. When she was five- or six-and-twenty she married Mr. Vandeleur, a distinguished man, a good deal older than herself, who held a good government post in India. Out there Aunt Cissy got friendly with Buddhist priests and jugglers and snake-charmers and all sorts of wonderful people, and picked up the most interesting things travelling about the country. After some years of study at occult subjects she found out that Mr. Vandeleur's soul didn't soar high enough to reach the rarified atmosphere she had herself attained, and that comparative solitude was essential to her. So she left him quite amicably in India and came and settled in Kensington, to pursue her studies undisturbed. I believe he had a liver, and was very fond of eating, and had most conservative and orthodox notions. So that altogether he must have been a trial to Aunt Cissy."

"And have you lived here with your aunt ever since?"

"Oh, no," returned Clare, opening her glittering green eyes; "I have only been with Aunt Cissy a few

months, since my mother died in Dublin last summer and left me in her care. I am not in mourning, because Aunt Cissy objects to it. She doesn't believe in death, you know! That is one of her notions. She thinks that dead people are all about us in the air, and that, if we keep our spirits sufficiently clear, we are able to see and talk to them. It makes my flesh creep even to think of it!"

"Do you do any work for your aunt?" asked Laline, wondering greatly what the nature of her own duties would be.

"No. I wanted to, but she found me too 'earthly.' That means, I suppose, that I am not skinny enough to please her," Clare added, rather viciously—"at least," she corrected herself, glancing at Laline's slim figure, "I don't exactly mean skinny—I mean spiritual-looking."

Laline burst into a hearty laugh.

"I don't in the least mind being called skinny, I assure you," she said, good-humouredly.

The two girls offered a very marked contrast in appearance. Clare Cavan's startling fairness and pallor, her abundant hair, red by day, but converted by artificial light into a ripe gold, the voluptuous curves of her figure, her aquiline features, almost Egyptian in profile from the sharp outlines of the nose and chin and curled upper lip, her scarlet mouth that constantly smiled, her heavy white eyelids drooping over her brilliant eyes, and complexion "pale with the golden gleam of an eyelash dead on the cheek"—all these items combined to form a most picturesque and unique personality, and a type of beauty certain to provoke discussion and arouse in some keen admiration, and in others a feeling akin to repulsion.

In Laline Armstrong, or "Lina Grahame," as she now called herself, there was no element to provoke spon-

taneous dislike. A little above the medium height, her girlish slenderness made her appear taller than she really was; but her quick, graceful movements were rather those of a short than a tall person. Her habitual expression was alternately eager and dreamy. Her soft auburn hair, which had grown some shades darker within the past few years, was coiled neatly at the back of her shapely head, and rippled in natural waves above her broad brow. Her nose was short and straight, her mouth rather large than small, and full of charming curves, humorous and tender, her chin was round, and under her level dark eyebrows her eyes, of wonderful depth and darkness, looked out with a wistful intentness, accentuated by the comparative shortness of her vision. When Laline was amused she laughed outright, showing two rows of dazzling teeth; whereas Clare never passed beyond a smile, in spite of her native Irish humour.

In colouring, too, the girls offered a marked contrast. Laline's complexion was of a pinky fairness, varying from cream to a rose-flush in her cheeks, which came and went with the least excitement. Her voice was lower in pitch, and of a more contralto quality than that of Clare, who to the silvery sweetness of Mrs. Vandeleur's tones added a touch of caressing "Irish blarney" in her intonation.

"I should so very much like to help Aunt Cissy in her work!" resumed Miss Cavan. "And it seems rather hard that I can't just because I am rather plump, doesn't it? In evening-dress I am only twenty-two inches round the waist—and that isn't absolutely unwieldy, is it?"

"Not at all," said Laline.

She was beginning to wonder whether she herself would get discharged from her post if she grew any

fatter; but she had already decided that in this household she must get used to surprising incidents and alarming statements, so she made no further comment at the time.

Clare was going to an evening "At home" at nine o'clock, she informed her new acquaintance.

"And I shall be so grateful if you will help me to dress and give me your opinion of my frock. It is a deep-red velvet, cut square. Rather daring with my red hair, isn't it? But I think the effect is nice."

Susan, the maid, entered at that moment with a message to the effect that Mrs. Vandeleur would be glad if Miss Grahame would come up-stairs to see her in her study.

"I can't come with you," said Clare—"I've got to dress; and, besides, aunt hasn't asked me. But I shall just pop my head in before I go. I hope she won't frighten you too much! She's dreadfully weird at times; and I believe she drove one of her secretaries into an asylum. Oh, you're not the first secretary she's had by at least a dozen! They've all been too mundane or too unimpressible, or too illiterate or not beautiful enough, or else Aunt Cissy has sent them quite off their heads and they've been packed off to asylums! Of course she might have saved herself all the expense of a secretary by employing me—indeed, that was poor mamma's idea when she left me in Aunt Cissy's care, and my aunt's idea, too. But, as soon as she saw me, she wouldn't hear of my touching her precious papers and things! However, I am beginning to do her a great deal of good socially by going out and talking of my wonderful aunt, and making people want to consult her; so that I am worth having after all."

Laline was convinced by this speech that Miss Cavan deeply resented her aunt's refusal to employ her as her

secretary, and that she cherished a keen jealousy against any other applicant for the post, and would not be loath to warn them away by exaggerating its difficulties and dangers. But Laline's life had taught her self-control, and it was with a firm step and composed manner that she proceeded to the room on the first floor, given up to Mrs. Vandeleur's "studies."

The apartment occupied the entire first floor of the house, which was by no means large. Folding-doors had once filled an archway in the middle of the room, but they were now replaced by hangings of tapestry. Dark oak panelling, mellowed by age, went up to within a few feet of the ceiling, across which the stars in their courses were painted upon a midnight sky, while a frieze of tapestry, which in faded colours and mediæval outlines pictured the "Dance of Death," completed the wall-decoration of the apartment.

The room was full of furniture, chiefly of oak and elaborately carved, and many curious old-fashioned cabinets and cupboards of various shapes and sizes were to be found in the corners and against the walls. A high carved oak mantelshelf was surmounted by a mystical picture, incomprehensible to the uninitiated, but which was named the "Awakening of the Spirit World;" and everywhere, scattered over the mantelpiece, on shelves, within glass-covered antique tables, and in the cabinets about the room, there was a multitude of curios, of old-fashioned charms and relics, of amulets, and metal images of roughly-beaten gold, ornaments from the East, fat little gods in soapstone and ivory, bead fetiches of North American Indians, and delicately-carved skulls and skeletons in German work of the Middle Ages—a heterogeneous collection, to which the superstitions of the entire world seemed to have each contributed their part.

In a deep arm-chair of dark oak, with a high-carved back, the little priestess of the room sat among cushions of Oriental brocade. The chair was so large and the little lady so small and fragile that she seemed to Laline to encamp rather than to sit in it; but the darkened wood formed a most effective background for her pale face and powdered hair. Mrs. Vandeleur was writing at a table littered with papers; but as Laline entered she laid down her pen and put her gold-rimmed spectacles on the table.

"Sit down, child," she said, pointing to a low-cushioned seat near the wide fireplace, furnished with red tiles and shining brass-dogs, upon which logs of wood were burning, it being one of Mrs. Vandeleur's principles to ignore the existence of gas and of coals alike—"sit down, and let me look at you! To-morrow morning you must come to me for money and buy something else to wear. I detest black, and black silk most of all!"

"What would you like me to wear?" asked Laline, smiling.

"White—white in soft folds. There should be no stiff outlines about you; your skin and hair supply the requisite colour."

"But white will get very dirty in London, surely!" Laline objected.

"Not if you have enough white dresses," returned her employer, loftily. "Go to-morrow and buy four, of creamy-white nun's veiling. I will make a sketch to show you how they must be made. Presently you shall have others. I should like to see you in white velvet," she concluded, gazing dreamily at Laline through her jewelled eye-glasses, which she invariably used in preference to her spectacles when not alone or not engaged in writing.

"White velvet would be very expensive, I am afraid," Laline was beginning, when Mrs. Vandeleur cut her short.

"Leave off thinking of money altogether!" she said. "What does money matter? If we can have the necessities of life—and among them I count beautiful surroundings, which are essential to a woman of my nature—of what use is extra money? Look at my niece Clare. She is forever drawn this way and that by two mastering passions—love of men and their admiration and desire of money. The conflict will spoil her beauty. Already it is so marked in its results that her presence troubles me. The beings by whom in the spirit and the flesh I am surrounded must be without harrowing passions or disturbing longings. Tell me—how does this room affect you? Stand up, look about you, and speak out quite fearlessly."

Laline rose and looked about her. As she did so she became conscious of a singular perfume, faint but penetrating, which filled the air. This arose in part from the many sandal-wood ornaments and receptacles about the room, and also from Mrs. Vandeleur's practice of burning joss-sticks and pastilles.

As Laline afterwards learned, her employer was also much addicted to the use of Eastern perfumes, high in price and difficult to obtain, with which her hair, hands, and clothing were liberally sprinkled. The wood logs, too, seemed to emit a fragrant odour, and the mingled scents gave to the atmosphere a quality peculiar to that room, and with which Laline ever afterwards associated it.

A lamp of ruby glass, suspended by silver chains from the ceiling on the farther side of the tapestry-hangings, supplied light to the farther portion of the room, illuminating feebly the spacious bookcase, the low divans, the corner cupboards, and the tall brazier, which formed its chief furniture. The standing-lamp of Mrs. Vandeleur's

writing-table was shaded by amber silk, and, with the two unlit wax-candles in silver stands on her table, gave, but for the dancing firelight, the sole means of illuminating the apartment.

Laline stood for a few seconds gazing about her at the crystal balls, the strange little ebony wands, the framed parchment-scrolls inscribed with cabalistic signs, the heavy volumes in moth-eaten covers, and the many other signs of abstruse and unwholesome studies into the unknown which met her eye. Then she turned slowly, fascinated by the piercing gaze of Mrs. Vandeleur; and, drawing insensibly a little nearer to her, she scanned that lady's face.

"The room is beautiful and interesting," she said, "but it affects me rather unpleasantly. I feel oppressed and stifled, as though a weight had been put upon my heart and I could not breathe. There are so many things about that I do not understand, and some that fascinate but half frighten me. I feel——"

She hesitated, blushed, then stopped outright.

"Go on!" said Mrs. Vandeleur, imperatively.

"Well, it sounds tactless and discourteous, but I feel as if I would rather be on a wide common, with the wind blowing a little rain into my face, than here, and that, if I passed much of my life here, I might grow into an idle, listless dreamer, with all the best side of my nature sent to sleep forever."

"Silly child!" said Mrs. Vandeleur, holding out her little hands and gently drawing the girl down on her knees beside her chair. "But yours is just the temperament I want. My secretary, my companion, who will take down my ideas and clothe them in suitable language, must not be a mere echo of myself. I am at present engaged on two great works. One is to be called *Necromancy in the Nineteenth Century*, and the

other *The Occult Vision*. With a mind like yours, fresh and untainted by the world, to supplement my own, I can reach higher altitudes of thought. But for this purpose your mind and spirit must be as clear as a rivulet, in which I may read my changing fancies mirrored. While engaged with me on this work, no thoughts of either of those disturbing elements, love or money, must derange your spirit. I can read in your eyes that you are not mercenary; as to love—you have never loved, and yet you are keeping back some secret from the world and from me."

Looking closely into the girl's eyes, Mrs. Vandeleur softly smoothed her forehead with her fingers. Laline was conscious of a sudden and overpowering desire to confide in the weird little lady, which she rightly attributed to the magnetism of the latter's touch and gaze. Disengaging herself by a quick gesture, she rose to her feet, and spoke with ringing earnestness and unexpected decision.

"If I am to help you in your work, Mrs. Vandeleur," she said, "it is of no use to begin by trying to paralyse my will and make it subject to yours. On such terms I could not stay with you. I think your work is very interesting and fascinating, and that you are exceedingly kind. I know quite well that I am very easily influenced on one side of my character; but I have another side, too, or I should not be here now, nor should I have taken my life into my own hands as I did four years ago. As to money, I think as you do. As to love and marriage, they are not for me; they are shut out of my life altogether. I must not think of them either now or at any future time. If I have a secret, it is not one to be ashamed of. Why, then, try to force it from me?"

"I know your secret," said Mrs. Vandeleur, quietly—"you are already married!"

CHAPTER IX.

THAT night, when Clare Cavan returned at midnight from her reception, she thanked the yawning Susan for sitting up for her, and softly proceeded to the top floor, where were three bedrooms occupied respectively by Mrs. Vandeleur's two servants, and by her niece and her new secretary.

Laline was in bed but not asleep. She lay awake, thinking with interest of her new surroundings. Her work that evening had been writing at the dictation of Mrs. Vandeleur a long treatise concerning second sight. Part of it she had understood, and part had been wholly incomprehensible to her, as she was not yet accustomed to the semi-mystical jargon in which Mrs. Vandeleur clothed her ideas.

Very little more talk of a personal nature had passed between her and her employer. Laline had neither denied nor agreed to the latter's assertion that she was already married, nor had the little lady again alluded to the subject, contenting herself by warning her new secretary against placing any confidence in Clare Cavan, who, she declared, had been born under an opposing star to that of Laline.

It was all very new and fascinating to the imaginative young girl, coming as this experience did after the monotonous drudgery of a suburban day-school, and so much excited had she been by the incidents of the evening that she was fully awake when, at a little after twelve o'clock, a tap at her bedroom door heralded the entrance of Clare Cavan.

Mrs. Vandeleur's niece was shading her eyes with one

hand from the light of a candle carried in the other. Her gown of crimson velvet was cut very low in the square front, displaying to full advantage the startling whiteness and smooth texture of her skin, and by the candle-light her eyes sparkled like green topazes.

"Do wake up!" she whispered. "I've something most interesting and wonderful to tell you—I'm in love!"

Placing her candle on the dressing-table, she sat in a chair near, and, clasping her hands round her knees, proceeded to purr out her story.

"It was Lady Moreham's reception, as I told you. She goes in for artists and celebrities, and she has an immense belief in Aunt Cissy, and consults her about everything. Artists, you know, always rave about me; they have the bad taste to admire my horrid red hair! But, to explain really what happened last night, I must go back. It's lovely to have at last a girl of my own age to talk to and confide in! You must know that Aunt Cissy gets cards for all private views and that sort of thing; she seldom goes, except to quite the most exclusive; but I use her tickets. I simply adore pictures! Well, about two months ago, I was looking at a lovely fat Paris Bordone lady in an old-master exhibition. I didn't really mean to attract attention to myself, because the lady in the picture had my coloured hair. Do you know Paris Bordone's beauties? They are always fat and white-skinned, in clothes much too tight for them, with red-velvet dresses and pearls in their red hair. Suddenly I heard a voice behind me—a man's voice—say, 'By George, what colouring! The very replica of the picture! She's superb!' Of course, I never thought he could be talking of me; but I turned round and found the man who spoke looking full at me. Such a handsome man! Tall, with a splendid figure, a square jaw, black hair, blue eyes—an Irish combination that I

love, though in this case I've learned he gets it from his Highland descent. He stared at me so hard that I could hardly get my eyes away; he was really looking at me so intently that I was quite fascinated. At last I felt I was blushing deeply, and he too flushed. His friend touched his arm, and that seemed to recall him to himself, for he moved away, and I saw him no more that day. It was the strangest thing, for I fell a good deal in love with him on the spot, and somehow felt certain that I should meet him again. So sure I was, that I had my new evening gown, the one I have on now, made just like the Paris Bordone picture simply because I felt convinced that some day he would see me in it. Aunt Cissy would be able to explain the meaning of that sort of feeling. I only know that I felt it."

"And did you never meet him again until to-night?" asked Laline, sitting up in bed, interested, as are all girls, in anything in the nature of a love-story.

"Once only. He was coming out of the South Kensington Museum late on a Saturday afternoon, and I had been shopping in the Brompton Road. He passed quite close to me, and knew me in a moment, as I could see, and I was so disappointed that he did not speak to me."

"How could he," exclaimed Laline, scandalised, "since you are a lady, and, I suppose, he is a gentleman? It would have been an insult which you would have resented."

Clare eyed her curiously under half-lowered white eyelids, and began taking the hairpins out of her hair.

"Of course I should!" she answered, after a slight pause. "But he didn't. Then I went to the South Kensington Museum constantly on nearly all the free days for more than a month, until I knew all the cases near the entrances by heart. But I never met him, and I began really to despair until to-night."

"And were you introduced to him?" asked Laline, much interested. Her notions of what was right and becoming in a young gentlewoman had been considerably startled by Clare's confessions; but she was a sympathetic listener all the same.

"As soon as I walked into the room I saw him," replied Clare, triumphantly. "He was watching me all the while I was shaking hands with Lady Moreham; and only a few moments after I could feel rather than see that he was being brought up to be introduced by Miss Moreham, who was helping her mother to receive. He had asked to be introduced to me, as I knew he would. And fancy! I had supposed all the time that he was only an artist, but I learned that he is in a very good position, and will have heaps of money some day. Isn't that delightful?"

"Why?"

"Why? Because I adore him! His eyes are perfectly lovely—they sparkle like blue stars! And he has a trick of listening very attentively when one is talking, and just drawing his black eyebrows together while he stares hard at one's face, which is irresistible!"

"And is he in love with you?"

"Of course he is! He fell in love with me the first moment he saw me."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Do you think one requires to be told that sort of thing?" inquired Clare, disdainfully. "He looked it—that was enough. Before I left, Miss Moreham contrived to compliment me on my conquest. She told me that he is next of kin to one of the richest men in London."

"And what will your aunt say?"

"Oh, there is nothing that aunt would like better than to see me safely married to somebody with money! That is why she buys me nice clothes, and sends me to

‘At homes’ and dances and private views. She wants to get me off her hands. In spite of her dreaminess, you’ll find later on that there’s a lot of the wisdom of the serpent about Aunt Cissy.”

“Shall you tell her about this?”

“I shall have to, for he’s going to call either to-day or the next day. He has heard a great deal about aunt, he said, and is very anxious to know her, as he is awfully interested in all about palmistry and divination and that sort of thing. It is my belief that he’s going to consult her as to our future lives. Oh, I shall never sleep to-night! I feel so terribly excited! I love his voice; it’s deep and sweet, with a certain firmness; and, when I gave him my hand in saying ‘Good-bye,’ he didn’t give a conventional handshake, but held it tight a long time. I hadn’t the heart to draw it away, as I dare say I should have done. It made me thrill all over. I shall simply count the minutes until I see him again!”

There was no doubt in Laline’s mind as to her companion’s sincerity. Clare’s eyes shone with a tender, reflective light, which marvellously enhanced her beauty; and when at last she left off talking of her conquest and retired to her own room, it was with the avowed intention of dreaming of her new admirer.

Laline for her part lay awake for a long time after Clare’s departure. Just the least little pang of regret, which, however, was far removed from envy, shot across the young girl’s heart as she reflected that her position in life would always be that of confidant and never of principal in love-affairs. How short a time it had taken that journey in the *fiacre* in the rain to the house of the English Consul; and yet the effects of that one half-hour were to be stamped upon her entire life! Of her father she often thought, sometimes with anxiety not untouched by self-reproach. She did not wish ever to see

him again, nor could she school herself to forgive the callous greed with which he had designed to make a bargain of his motherless child. But he was her father—her mother had once loved him; and Laline often wondered how he had weathered the rain-cloud of debts and difficulties which had gathered over his head.

But of the man whom that same fateful visit had made her lord and master Laline hardly ever thought at all. Her life at Norwood had been too busy to allow her to indulge either in recollections of the past or dreams of the future, and in the three short weeks that she had known Wallace Armstrong she had seen so little of him that it was not surprising if her memory of him had become blurred and indistinct. The fact that he too was bound for life to a lost mate had hardly ever occurred to her; the bond was of his own choosing, and a man who, according to her father's accusations, was a forger and a cheat, might well be expected to ignore any ties which brought no profit to him.

But to-night for the first time the idea of this detested husband, this man who, in order to secure for himself an income, had married an ignorant child, for whom he cared nothing, that a lie might be turned to a truth and a victim provided, haunted Laline's wakeful spirit. She was as yet too young and too entirely fancy-free to lament with any bitterness the life-long loneliness which Wallace Armstrong's selfish action had entailed upon her. But something in Clare's joyous description of her new love-affair recalled with painful clearness to Laline the fact that she herself was set apart from all other girls, and that never to her ears would a man's lips murmur words of love.

"I can't understand Clare's nature," she said to herself, as she lay with wide-open eyes fixed upon the darkness. "Of course I must never let myself grow fond of

any man, but if I were as free as she and really cared, I could not speak of it to a stranger, and especially a stranger I did not like! And I feel sure that Clare doesn't like me, in spite of her friendliness, and that she is very jealous of me with her aunt. Life in Queen Mary Crescent will be much more difficult and complicated than it was at Norwood. But this house is very quiet, at least, and no one will dream of seeking for Laline Garth in Mrs. Vandeleur's new secretary Lina Grahame."

With this soothing reflection, Laline fell to sleep, only to awaken in terror as early morning was breaking under the influence of a disquieting dream. It seemed to her that she was transported to the gates of an earthly paradise, a garden of enchanting beauty, where she wandered at will over mossy sward, breathing moss-laden air and listening to music of a more than earthly sweetness, music that seemed to whisper of love. Suddenly, as she was giving herself up to the full delights of the scene, a loud and brutal laugh sounded close behind her, her arms were seized and loaded with chains which cut into her flesh, and when she awoke and sprang up in bed with a stifled scream, weeping and trembling, she could still hear ringing in her ears the words of her captor—

"You belong to me! I am your husband!"

Too terrified to go to sleep again, Laline lay awake until the morning, and the unpleasant impression remained so strong that when she came down to breakfast her unusual pallor excited Clare's comments.

"You look as though you and not I had been up late last night," Miss Cavan said. "I am always white, so that I don't look any different to-day. You don't seem to have any appetite. What is the matter?"

"Nothing. I've only had a horrid dream!"

"Oh, you must tell Aunt Cissy! She is great on

dreams, and knows what everything in them means. People come from tremendous distances to consult her about their dreams. What was yours all about?"

"Only silly fancies. This morning I want you to tell me where I ought to go shopping. You see I don't know London at all, and I have to order four gowns of white nun's veiling, and something white I must get to wear in the house this afternoon. I have only three dresses—a black silk, a blue serge, and a gray tweed; and your aunt says they all set her teeth on edge, they are so dark and stiff and plain."

"So aunt thinks white is your color?" observed Clare, glancing askance at Laline. "She evidently considers you very candid and unsophisticated."

The words suggested a sneer, but not so the tone; and that morning Clare proved herself invaluable in assisting Laline to make her purchases. She was the right guide on such an expedition, having excellent taste and the advantages of an extremely economical training; and when the girls returned home for luncheon they were both laden with parcels and brimful of good-humour and excitement.

Very early in the afternoon Mrs. Vandeleur drove off in a hired brougham on some mysterious errand connected with her divining powers, leaving a message for her secretary to the effect that she would return between three and four o'clock, and hoped to find Miss Grahame awaiting her in the study. Clare Cavan, in a flutter of anticipation over her admirer's visit, betook herself to her room to put the finishing touches to her hair and toilet, after impressing upon Susan the necessity of letting her know at once if a gentleman should call to see her; and Laline, in the waning light of a wintry afternoon, found herself in the room sacred to her employer's occult studies.

It was too early for lamplight, yet the shadows cast by the dancing flames from the logs looked strange and eerie in that room of spells and charms. Altogether in keeping with her surroundings was the slender form, draped in the soft folds of a tea-gown of creamy-white serge and silk, seated on a low chair by the fire gazing into the glowing wood. Laline felt very nervous that day. Whether it was the result of her dream or the influence of the room she could not tell; but gradually a presentiment gathered in her mind that some momentous crisis in her life was coming nearer and nearer to her at every breath she drew.

Oppressed and over-strung, divided between a longing to fly from the room and a quivering desire to know the meaning of the strange foreboding which hung upon her spirit, Laline rose and began restlessly moving about the room, lightly lifting and as quickly putting down various trifles which arrested her attention. The fire-light, glancing here and there, centred and sparkled on a crystal ball which stood on Mrs. Vandeleur's desk. In the magic crystal, Laline's employer had gravely assured her, those of pure hearts and minds, when they knew its secret, could see mirrored the future and the past. Laline raised the crystal in her hands and pored into its depths.

Half mesmerised by so intent a gaze, the memory of last night's dream returned in force upon her mind, thrown out of balance by her agitated nerves and strange surroundings. Mistily, as she looked, she seemed to behold a face she once knew mirrored within the glistening depths of the crystal. But before she could do more than recognise the features of the man she had married, the study-door opened, and a voice, not from dreamland but from reality, spoke the name—

“Mr. Wallace Armstrong!”

CHAPTER X.

AT the announcement by the servant "Mr. Wallace Armstrong" the crystal ball fell from Laline's relaxed fingers and rolled upon the floor.

She stood as though paralysed, with her back to the window, through which the last rays of a fast-fading sunset touched her bright hair, making a halo of gold round her shadowed face. Her eyes were lowered; she dared not lift them; dared not meet her husband's gaze; dared not speak lest he should recognise her voice.

Wallace Armstrong, for his part, coming into the dark room, could distinguish little but a tall, slender woman's figure in long white draperies, a figure that neither moved nor spoke when the servant announced him, but stood more like a wraith than a living thing between him and the light. Was it a trick of the celebrated Mrs. Vandeleur, he wondered, to receive strangers in this way? It was certainly original and striking, if hardly calculated to set visitors at their ease.

"Is it Mrs. Vandeleur?" he asked. "I am afraid you dropped something as I came in. May I find it for you?"

As he bent his head Laline looked down upon it, and remembered, with a little quiver of repulsion, how often at the Rue Planché she had noticed his thick curly black hair.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed, at that moment. "A crystal ball. It isn't broken or even chipped. Is it a magic crystal, like the one Rossetti wrote about?"

Still she did not answer, and found, to her horror, that he was looking at her in surprise. Raising her eyes to

his in a sudden defiant impulse, she realised at once that Wallace had changed almost as much as she herself had done. For one thing, the heavy dark moustache, which four years ago had shaded his mouth, was close shaved; he wore his hair much shorter than before, and the look of brooding sullenness was gone from his brow. He was now to all appearance as perfectly "in condition," physically and mentally, as before at Boulogne he had been neglected and "run down." Under straight black eyebrows his brilliant blue eyes glanced in searching interested fashion upon the face of the still figure before him; but the old haggard insolence, the old defiance and distrust, seemed to have entirely disappeared from his voice, face, and bearing, and before she had even opened her lips to speak to him, Laline felt that the horror and the hatred of years had already begun to melt away within her heart.

"I hope you will forgive me, Mrs. Vandeleur," the visitor observed, after a short pause, "for my intrusion. But I know so many of your intimate friends very well indeed that I thought I might venture to call, on the strength of the letter from Lady Moreham, which I sent to you by messenger this morning. I hope, by the way, that you received it?"

It was necessary for Laline to speak at last, and in very low tones she informed Mr. Armstrong that Mrs. Vandeleur was out, and that she was her secretary.

Her heart beat so violently as she spoke that it seemed to choke her, and she almost feared that he would hear its throbbing. She had often been told that her speaking voice was one of unusual depth and sweetness, and she dreaded lest he should recognise its tones. But though he inclined his head a little in her direction, the better to catch her murmured words, Mr. Armstrong made no comment upon them, but broke at once into

talk upon the different objects of interest about the room.

"May I wait here until Mrs. Vandeleur returns?" he asked; and, when she bowed her head in response, he went on at once with his remarks. "Like a page of old-world romance this room is. One might expect any wonder amid such surroundings. Are you versed in occult lore, may I ask? Miss Cavan, as I understand, admits that it has a kind of terrifying fascination for her."

A light seemed to flash upon Laline. This man, Wallace Armstrong, her husband, was none other than Clare Cavan's rich admirer, to whom she had been introduced on the preceding evening. Why had not some prescience taught her—Laline—who it was that Clare had described as tall and strong, blue-eyed, black-haired, of Highland descent, and next-of-kin to one of the richest men in London!

This man, then, had presented himself at Mrs. Vandeleur's house in the character of her niece's lover, disregarding altogether the ceremony which had bound him, more than four years ago, to a bride who had escaped from him.

As to his gentleness of manner, Laline knew better than to trust to that. Vividly, while he spoke, she recalled Wallace's good-humour and kindness to her friends the children, and the treats he had given them at the pastry-cook's, and afterwards in that memorable drive. All the experiences of those three weeks seemed to crowd back upon the girl's memory, the while Wallace, not unnaturally mistaking her awkward silence for shyness, strove by talking to put her at her ease.

If only Mrs. Vandeleur or Clare would come, she thought, and end this terrible *tête-à-tête*! She scarcely heeded the words he uttered, so concerned was she in

listening for tones in his voice which she could recognise. She had never even asked him to sit down, nor did she dare to ring for lights. So that she was standing just where he had found her on entering the room, with her back to the window and her hands clasped before her, when the door opened noiselessly, and Clare Cavan crept towards them.

"Why, how dark it is!" she exclaimed. "And how stupid of Susan to have shown you up here, Mr. Armstrong! How are you? I must ring at once for the lamp. I had no idea that you were here."

"I think the servant was under the impression that your aunt had returned," said Wallace, as he turned to shake hands with Clare. In an instant Laline made a swift movement towards the door, hoping to escape before he had clearly seen her; but in this design she was circumvented by the sudden entry of Susan, who met her in the doorway, carrying in her hands the upper portion of the tall lamp which usually stood by the side of Mrs. Vandeleur's writing-table.

The light fell full on Laline's face, and quick as thought Wallace Armstrong turned and gazed upon her features thus revealed to him. As though to facilitate his inspection, Susan, lamp in hand, paused by the door to inform Miss Grahame of Mrs. Vandeleur's return; and Wallace Armstrong gazed his fill, and all his life remembered vividly just how her face looked then—the lovely flesh-tints paled with agitation and fear, the soft dark eyes distended, and between the level brown eyebrows two perpendicular lines indicative of worry and distress. Every curve of the parted red lips, of the firmly-modelled chin and long well-rounded throat, he learned by heart in those few seconds, and his eyes lingered with wondering admiration upon her small pink ear, set far back, and enhanced in beauty by the

bright hair, almost yellow at this point, which half-veiled the upper portion of its curled outline.

Clare Cavan noted with astonishment and indignation the direction of Wallace's eyes—noted, too, the perceptible start he gave as he first beheld Laline's face in the full light, and the fixed intensity of his gaze. A keen stab of venomous jealousy shot through Clare's heart, and she mentally registered a vow to be even with Laline for having provoked Mr. Armstrong's attention.

Left alone with Clare, Wallace surprised her by making no reference to Laline. He began, on the contrary, at once to talk of the various persons whom they had met on the preceding evening—light desultory conversation, not at all after Miss Cavan's heart, which he continued until the entrance of Mrs. Vandeleur broke up their *tête-à-tête*.

Wallace Armstrong was a man of considerable determination and strength of character, as might be guessed by the squareness of his jaw and the firm lines of his handsome mouth. He had fully made up his mind this afternoon to please Mrs. Vandeleur, and he succeeded admirably. The genuine interest he took both in her personality and her pursuits made it easy work for him to please her, the more so as the little lady was greatly swayed by the outside appearance of those she met, and Mr. Armstrong's finely proportioned figure, handsome face, and frank and courteous manners were well calculated to satisfy the most exacting of women.

To him the experience was unique and delightful. This picturesque little old-young lady, with her powdered hair, her odd talk and pretensions to hidden powers, her shimmering gray-satin gown redolent of some faint Eastern perfume, her dainty lace frills and cuffs, her small fingers sparkling with diamonds, and her searching dark eyes peering at him from behind

her jewelled eye-glasses, Wallace considered a most interesting and delightful personage; while, as offering a contrast to her *rococo* charm, Clare Cavan, in a tea-gown of sea-green cashmere and silk, her untidy yellow-red hair crowning her alluring white face, appeared to supply just the note of flesh-and-blood actuality which would otherwise have been wanting in the scene.

Clare made tea, and hovered near him as much as possible. Not once did Mr. Armstrong allude to his meeting with the secretary; but he questioned Mrs. Vandeleur closely as to the properties of the crystal which he had seen fall from Laline's hands when he entered the room.

"The story is that only certain special temperaments can discover anything in it, isn't it?" he asked, while he held the ball in his hands and examined it carefully.

"It is a gift," said Mrs. Vandeleur—"a gift given to few. Happily I have discovered a young girl whose mind is so finely tempered that in time she may go very far, very far indeed, in the study of the occult."

"Indeed! May I ask how you came across her?"

"Outsiders would tell you by accident; but my creed does not admit of accident. I put certain words in a public print, and directed them to one particular type of mind. I wanted that especial spirit; I appealed to that, and it came to me as surely as a needle comes to a magnet. That was all."

"But you had heaps and heaps of unsuitable replies as well, aunt," put in Clare, sweetly.

It was by such remarks as this that she daily alienated her aunt's liking more completely; but for reasons of her own Clare did not wish the conversation to turn upon Laline.

"They do not count," said Mrs. Vandeleur, loftily, though with a shade of annoyance on her brow. "The

world will always be composed of the two or three who understand and the millions who do not. Suffice it that I found the temperament I required—a creature of perfect purity and truth, unsullied by thoughts of love or money.”

“ ‘ Her soul was pure and true ;
The good stars met in her horoscope,
Made her of spirit, fire, and dew, ’ ”

quoted Wallace Armstrong, looking steadily in the fire, as though he saw some picture there—a picture, it might be, of a tall and slender maiden, in straight white draperies, with her sweet face lowered and the light making an aureole of her hair.

“ Whose lines are those,” asked Mrs. Vandeleur, much interested, “ and why do you quote them ? ”

“ They are from Browning’s ‘ Evelyn Hope,’ and they seemed appropriate to such a woman as you were describing.”

“ You have seen Miss Grahame, my aunt’s secretary, of whom she is speaking, Mr. Armstrong,” said Clare, hardly able to control her vexation, but speaking very sweetly. “ She was here with you when I came in.”

“ There was a lady here when I entered, and I supposed that she was Mrs. Vandeleur at first,” he answered, composedly ; “ but she hardly spoke, except to tell me of my mistake, and it was much too dark to see her face.”

“ I thought you saw her when the lamp came in,” observed Clare, innocently. “ She is such a nice girl, full of fun, and does so enjoy shopping ! I hope you will like the tea-gown I got for her at Baker’s this morning, aunt. Lina much prefers stiff tweed or serge tailor-built things ; but I knew you insisted upon white dresses and flowing lines for her, so I coaxed her into

having them. I don't think I ever saw anybody so fond of sweets; she is quite like a child in a grocer's shop!"

By this artfully-planned speech Clare hoped that she had spoiled the romantic effect of Laline's appearance. "Evelyn Hope" enjoying sweets in a grocer's shop, and with difficulty restrained from purchasing tweed tailor-made gowns, was surely sufficiently prosaic. Apparently Wallace thought so too, for he did not pursue the subject, and the talk presently drifted to palmistry.

"Some day you must tell my fortune, Mrs. Vandeleur," her visitor said.

"A good deal of it I can read in your face," said the little lady, promptly. "You have considerable self-control, but you are capable of going to the greatest lengths of what people would call folly for the sake of one you love. You like many people; you love very few. But where you love, it is a passion, a religion."

He flushed deeply, and then laughed.

"I don't think I am quite so fine a character as you are kind enough to suppose me," he said. "There are no deep tragedies in the daily routine of life at a bank for a rich man's nephew."

"Yet you have had some moving experiences," pursued Mrs. Vandeleur thoughtfully, still scanning him through her eye-glasses—"experiences involving much will-power and considerable self-sacrifice, and making their mark upon your after-life."

"Has Lady Moreham told you much about me?" he asked, quickly.

"I do not need to be told by others what I can read in your face. Give me your hand; now both hands."

She bent closely over first one and then the other for a moment, and then looked up.

"Another's life, another's career is strangely involved in yours," she said. "Your line of fate is hampered by

another's. It is an association which will bring you nothing but harm. It still lies within your power to sever it."

Clare Cavan, watching curiously, saw the young man's healthy colour pale and a set look come into his mouth. But he did not speak, and Mrs. Vandeleur continued.

"Just at this point in your career the easy life you have led of late will be utterly changed. Your whole existence will be swerved from its ordinary course, for a new and most powerful element will enter it. From what I can judge, it will be love, the love of a woman."

A triumphant smile flashed into Clare's eyes. She was inclined to place implicit faith in her aunt's prophecies, and had little doubt but that a passion for herself would be the new element introduced into Wallace Armstrong's career. Apart from his monetary position, she was really very much in love with this extremely personable young man, who clearly admired her, and was desirous of getting into her aunt's good graces. Mrs. Vandeleur's Sibylline speeches about his future were therefore profoundly interesting to Clare, who sat supporting her chin on her hands in a picturesque attitude near the fire, listening with all her ears.

"Your love-affairs will bring you a great deal of trouble," pursued the little prophetess. "Or, rather, I should say, your love-affair, for you will have but one."

"Won't she return my affection, then?" asked Wallace, half laughing, but with a note of suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"There will be trouble and partings and evil wrought you by an enemy, until death severs a link and you are free."

Mrs. Vandeleur spoke slowly and oracularly on her last words; she dropped his hands, and, leaning back in her chair, passed her fingers wearily over her eyes.

"I am tired," she said. "But I foresee trouble before you, and I should like to warn you, for I take a great interest in you. Be very wary of your friends. False love and false friendship are Will-o'-the-wisps, to lead you to destruction. Now you must go. I have my work to attend to. But you must come and see me again often, very often, for I like you."

With an imperial graciousness she stretched out her hand, which Wallace lightly kissed, as he felt he was expected to do.

"I am really grateful for your kind forethought about my future," he said, "and I shall certainly come again."

He was not in the least superstitious, and Mrs. Vandeleur's pretensions to omniscience surprised and amused him; but he realised that she was at least sincere in her charlatanism, and that she believed in herself almost as much as she expected others to believe in her. Moreover, she had touched a sore and secret place in his heart in her rambling talk. No one knew better than he how the course of his life for the past few years had been overshadowed by an association of ill omen, so far as his own prospects were concerned, and Mrs. Vandeleur's intuition in this respect impressed him considerably.

Clare Cavan led him down the stairs and opened the street-door for him, looking strangely beautiful with the light from the ruby-coloured lamp in the hall falling on her shining hair and white face, and Wallace turned on the pavement to look back and bow again to her. But Miss Cavan had closed the door, not finding the north-east wind to her liking; and at the dining-room window, close pressed against the glass, watching his retreating figure, was the face of the secretary, Lina Grahame, wearing a look of unmistakable dislike and fear.

"That little old lady with the powdered hair is a witch!" Wallace said to himself, as he pursued his way. "I am already in love, and already in trouble over it."

CHAPTER XI.

THAT night Laline went to bed with her head in a whirl of emotion and perplexity.

All through the evening she had had to endure the comments of both Mrs. Vandeleur and her niece on the manners and appearance, the character, and the prospects of Wallace Armstrong, and had had to listen, to all appearance unmoved, while the possibilities of his falling in love and marrying were freely discussed.

And all the while she knew that she was his wife, sold by an impecunious father, bought by a penniless husband, unrecognised and forgotten, but his wife none the less in the eyes of the law and the sight of heaven.

She could have laughed aloud when Mrs. Vandeleur gravely stated that Wallace Armstrong was a man of "singular nobility of character, of fine artistic tastes, chivalrous instincts, and a high disregard of mercenary considerations." She could not even join in praise of his good looks.

"I think I have a prejudice against men with square jaws and black hair and light eyes," was all that she said.

But there was a marked constraint in her tone, and Mrs. Vandeleur glanced at her sharply.

"You seem to have taken a dislike against Mr. Armstrong," she said. "It is curious, for his is a nature which should blend perfectly with yours. I should cer-

tainly not have thought you had been born under opposing planets."

"I don't feel that I ever want to meet him again!" said Laline, emphatically.

"Above all, dear," exclaimed Mrs. Vandeleur, holding up a warning forefinger, "don't attempt to run counter to such an instinct as that! When your whole spirit seems to rise in arms against a personality, the feeling of repulsion is given you as a token to beware of them; and, if you feel as you say towards Mr. Armstrong, have nothing whatever to do with him!"

"I will take your advice," said Laline, dutifully.

But the oddest little prick of vexation came to her as she spoke. In spite of her dread of her husband, and her terror lest he should recognise in her the lost Laline, she had been strangely interested in him that afternoon. His gentleness and geniality she knew to be a sham, his agreeable manners merely things he assumed and dropped at will. None knew better than she that Wallace Armstrong was a man without honour, principle, or remorse—one who would lie and cheat and drink and swear, who would strike an old man and deceive a friendless girl—a creature in whom no truth was to be found. And yet, in spite of all this, and of the fact that he had entered Mrs. Vandeleur's house in the character of Clare Cavan's favoured admirer, Laline could not rid her mind of a secret hankering to see him again.

After all, he was her husband, although he did not know it. It would be her duty not to let his courtship of Clare go too far. Reveal herself she could not and would not; but she might at least contrive to learn from him news of her father. With such excuses she tried to blind herself to the fact that she wanted—greatly wanted, and yet as greatly feared—to meet Wallace Armstrong again.

The thought of him was ever present in her mind, although neither Mrs. Vandeleur nor Clare could contrive to draw from her another remark concerning him. Her brain was fully occupied with him as she put her head down on her pillow, and it was but natural that he should dominate her dreams, through the whole course of which she fancied herself alternately pursuing and fleeing from her husband.

Life at No. 21, Queen Mary Crescent was an entirely novel experience for Laline. Mrs. Vandeleur breakfasted in her bedroom—a small but cosy apartment on the ground floor, built out at the back of the house, and adjoining the dining- and drawing-rooms. By eleven o'clock she was visible, and Laline was required to read aloud to her, to copy or write at dictation, and to listen to long, rambling accounts of her employer's dreams, her opinions, or her psychic experiences. At half-past one the secretary was sent down-stairs to her luncheon; and from half-past three to half-past six or seven on four days a week Mrs. Vandeleur received visitors by appointment, and was by them consulted as to their past, present, and future.

There was no fixed rate of payment for these interviews; and, but for Clare's insidious suggestions, Laline would have thought that Mrs. Vandeleur cast horoscopes, read hands, and shuffled cards from pure love of necromantic lore. But on this point Miss Cavan undeceived her.

"Of course, dear Aunt Cissy doesn't make fixed charges," she purred, "because she knows its actionable. There's an absurd prejudice against fortune-telling and all that sort of thing, you know, though it's only really wicked when dirty old women do it at the back door! When ladies call on Aunt Cissy, after Susan has shown them into the drawing-room, and you have next gone in

and taken stock of them and prepared aunt to receive them, they talk to her about themselves and their characters and their love-affairs, and ask her advice and so on, till she must be perfectly sick of them! And, although she likes the importance of it enormously, divination and all that sort of thing take it out of her dreadfully. So it's only fair that she should get paid well for it. People know that, and, when they go, they slip gold or a cheque under the blotting-book on the writing-table. I peeped in once just before a *séance*, and saw the ends of several cheques sticking out of the shark's-skin cover of the blotter, and several loose sovereigns on the table beside it, just to give visitors a hint, no doubt. Aunt Cissy only has a mean little allowance from her husband—nothing like enough to satisfy her desire for the beautiful. You can't surround yourself with old oak and old silver and china and curios, and wear the whitest diamonds and the finest lace on two hundred a year. Oh, Aunt Cissy's very rich indeed—or she would be if she didn't waste so much money on knick-knacks and lumber!"

More than once Laline asked herself if she was not tacitly condoning a fraud by accepting her position in the establishment. But it was so clear that Mrs. Vandeleur thoroughly believed in herself, and also so certain that her intuition was little short of marvellous and her advice generally excellent, that Laline could not esteem her less on account of her professional fortune-telling.

Only on very rare occasions was Laline present at the interviews between Mrs. Vandeleur and her clients. The secretary herself, slim and tall, in her straight, white draperies, was a fascinating addition to the little Sibyl's household, her pure profile and dreamy dark eyes proving specially attractive to Mrs. Vandeleur's male visitors. Clare Cavan, listening to all that passed between Laline

and these latter from behind the plush curtains between the dining- and drawing-rooms, clenched her fists with envy, and could scarcely repress her scorn for a girl who let slip such splendid opportunities of securing valuable presents and the possibility of a brilliant marriage.

"It's aunt's wicked jealousy which makes her forbid me to see anybody who calls on business," Miss Cavan told herself. "That fool Lina snubbed a Russian prince yesterday! If I had been in her place, and he had offered me jewelry, I wouldn't have let him off under a hundred-guinea bracelet. I know as well as she does how to take care of myself; but an offer like that deserves something better than a frigid 'I have no jewels, and I require none! I will tell Mrs. Vandeleur you wish to consult her on your domestic affairs, and will explain by whom you are introduced.' Lina is a prude, or else she is much deeper than I am."

Meantime Clare was somewhat concerned because a whole week had elapsed since Wallace Armstrong's visit. It was true that he had written to Mrs. Vandeleur, asking whether she and her niece and secretary would care to pay a visit to the ancient house over Alexander Wallace's bank, to take tea there with himself and his uncle; but the wording of his letter had been far from satisfactory to Miss Cavan.

"I know how much interested you are in all that is ancient and historical," he wrote, "and I feel sure that, with your vivid imagination and insight, you would people some of the old rooms with occupants long since dead. My uncle, who declares himself too old to pay visits, and who is indeed verging on seventy, is very desirous of making your acquaintance. His early Scotch training inclines him to especial interest in second sight and similar phenomena, and I am certain that you would have many subjects in common. He particularly loves

to see bright young faces about him, and would, I know, be delighted to welcome those charming young ladies, Miss Cavan, and your secretary Miss Grahame, under his roof. So that I hope you will be able to fix an afternoon next week on which to honour the old house with a visit."

Mrs. Vandeleur had shown this letter to Clare, whose anger over one portion thereof had been extreme.

"Those charming young ladies, Miss Cavan and Miss Grahame," was the line that especially stuck in Clare's throat. By some means Lina Grahame must be kept away from this visit, which should be made to serve the very desirable purpose of introducing Clare to her future husband's uncle. That Alexander Wallace would take a great fancy to her Clare never doubted. Old men always admired her, her striking colouring and beautifully-rounded figure appealing even to the purblind. And she meant to be a very good niece to the wealthy banker, and a devoted wife to Wallace, so long as she should remain in love with him; and at the present time she did not foresee the possibility of her quick passion waning, as it had done on previous occasions. But Lina Grahame must not be present to spoil her plans; and Clare was greatly relieved when that young lady flatly refused the invitation as soon as it was announced to her.

"I shall ask Mrs. Vandeleur to let me stay at home," she said, while a deep flush spread over her face.

It was not only that she dreaded seeing more of her husband, in spite of the lurking fascination which he exercised over her, but that she felt unequal to the signal hypocrisy of meeting face to face that kindly-natured old Alexander Wallace, whose letter welcoming her as his niece she so well remembered reading in the streets of Boulogne more than four years ago. Naturally truth-

ful and sincere, Laline felt that it would be impossible for her to grasp the old man by the hand and sit at his table, the while she was rewarding his hospitality and friendliness with mean deceit, and that she would be untrue to herself were she to submit to such an ordeal.

Clare understood none of the thoughts which flew through her companion's brain, but she could not fail to note the changes on Laline's face, the sudden blush and the agitated expression in her eyes.

"I think you are quite right not to go," she said, soothingly. "Of course aunt and I and the nicer sort of people one meets appreciate you thoroughly, and know that you are a lovely and charming and well-bred lady. But I have heard that dear Mr. Armstrong was at one time rather go-ahead, and men are so stupid about little social distinctions; they never seem to realise the difference between a secretary and a lady's-maid, especially if both are pretty!"

Laline knew by this time quite enough of Clare to understand that the latter wished her to remain at home, and she almost laughed outright at the idea that she must not meet her own husband, lest she might spoil another girl's chances of marrying him. But there was no thought of marriage yet, and there would be time enough to speak out before then. Laline felt that she had reached a point in her life when to look forward was impossible. Wallace himself knew that he was married, and surely that knowledge should be sufficient to deter him from creating false hopes within another girl's heart! But in Wallace's honour, as Laline knew well, but little reliance was to be placed, and a pang of pity went through her as she looked at Clare and noticed the eager brightness of her eyes.

"Are you really fond of this Wallace Armstrong?" she asked her.

"My dear, I simply adore him! Do you wonder? Oh, I forgot that you didn't admire him! But you must admit that he is handsome and fascinating."

"I dare say many people would think so. But you told me just now that he had been wild. Surely you could not love a man of really bad reputation!"

"Oh, he has sown his wild oats by this time, no doubt! I should think he is nearly thirty. Besides, all men go the pace a little—I'm sure I should if I were a man. It's really too bad that we women should have to be so very, very good! Besides, I didn't hear anything very bad—only that he'd gambled a little bit and got into debt and been sent abroad for a time to cool him down. You can't cut a man for that sort of thing, otherwise one would have to drop all one's male acquaintances except school-boys."

Laline said no more. It was obviously impossible under the circumstances to warn Clare. Sometimes the girl wondered whether she should confide in Mrs. Vandeleur; but again she hesitated. Might not that lady—who, if her niece spoke truly, was of the world-worldly—be inclined to advise her young secretary to leave off the difficult struggle for life of a penniless girl, and, by simply announcing her identity, become reconciled to an easy and prosperous existence with a wealthy husband, who to strangers' eyes appeared to be all that was handsome, well-bred, and charming?

The mere idea was horrible to Laline. Never so long as she lived would she forget that scene of which she had been an unsuspected witness on her wedding morning. At any moment she could close her eyes and recall her father's flushed face and the angry pallor of her husband, could see both men, excited by drink and hate, struggling within a few feet of where she stood. At any moment she could recall the callous tones in which

her newly-made husband had spoken of her as a "lanky, half-fledged school-girl," who would be a "drag and a burden" on his life after having served his purpose by procuring for him his uncle's money and favour, and could hear again the sinister menace in his tones when he alluded to the possibility that she might refuse to tell lies to Alexander Wallace on his behalf.

That scene in the little *salon* of the Rue Planché had been the turning-point of Laline's career, and had suddenly transformed the dreamy, lonely child, supersensitive to kindness and of grateful, docile nature, into a woman, alert and thoughtful beyond her years, and armed with self-control, with suspicion, and with reserve.

Her nature was not meant to tend towards independence and mistrust of others. Love had been a necessity to Laline as a child; she had loved her mother intensely, and had felt her loss as irreparable. Torn from the refined seclusion of her early home, she had tried to adapt herself to the impecunious Bohemianism of her father's house, and had tried also very hard indeed to love her father. Had Wallace Armstrong not shown himself in his true colours on his wedding morning, she would in all probability have grown much attached to him, in spite of his sullen temper and dissipated habits. Already he had appeared to her eyes as a hero, a fairy prince, who had come to rescue Cinderella from Bénévoite's back kitchen and eternal darning, cooking, and dish-washing. But when, by the half-open *salon* door, she had stood and heard her husband and father quarrelling over the terms of the sale by which she had become Wallace Armstrong's property to free him from his money difficulties, her child's heart broke within her breast; she seemed to see the very minds and souls of the two men, vicious, sordid, and cruel, and her pure

spirit shrank in horror at the sight. The impression was one which neither time nor the wear and tear of life would ever efface ; and even now, when Wallace Armstrong had again appeared within her life, to all appearance a reformed character, with little trace of his former self remaining between her and her thoughts of him, the black soul of the scoundrel who had married her seemed to rise in warning against the folly of trusting such a man.

It was on a Saturday that Clare had discussed with Laline the invitation to the bank, a day that Laline ever afterwards remembered, bleak and wintry, the sky a chill gray, deepening to saffron near the horizon. On Saturday and Wednesday afternoons Mrs. Vandeleur drove out, sometimes with her secretary and sometimes alone. On this particular day she was bidden to a conference between patrons of the "occult" and distinguished sceptics at the house of a well-known woman of title interested in every new craze. Before four o'clock Clare also left the house to go to one of the many "At homes" at which her beauty and liveliness rendered her a most popular guest ; and Laline found herself for the first time since her arrival in London alone and free, with at least three hours at her own disposal.

Twenty-one Queen Mary Crescent was by no means a cheerful house after dusk, being full of creaking boards and a general "eeriness." Laline wanted to think, and had never lost her old love of wandering about alone in the open air. Within ten minutes of Clare's departure therefore she emerged from the house in her blue serge gown and a long fur-lined black cloak, and struck at once from the High Street into Kensington Gardens, her cheeks rosy under the touch of frosty air, and her heart beating with a strange excitement, which seemed to pre-sage some unusual experience.

CHAPTER XII.

LALINE met very few people in Kensington Gardens that afternoon.

The wind was keen, and every now and then drifting snowflakes told of the coming storm. The Round Pond was covered with a thin sheet of ice, and upon the green roof of Kensington Palace the snow was lightly strewn.

Laline walked fast, with eyes fixed steadfastly in front of her, absorbed in her own thoughts, holding her cloak together round her, and bending her supple frame to the wind.

It was her first walk unattended in the Gardens, and her errant footsteps led her to a long leafless avenue, through which she walked rapidly, listening to the wind in the branches above her head.

Suddenly mingling with the sound came a voice close behind her, upon hearing which she stopped with a smothered cry and turned a startled face towards the speaker.

Some instinct had told her that she would meet him, and it was to her own astonishment that she realised how glad she was to see him.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Grahame! Isn't it odd? Bad as the day is, I felt certain I should meet you here!"

"And I knew that I should meet you," she returned, quickly, before taking thought; then, seeing the gladness in his eyes, she added, hastily,—

"That is nothing! I have had those presentiments about people ever since I was a child. And they are not necessarily about people I know and like well. but also——"

"About people you dislike—such as I?"

"I was not going to say that, Mr. Armstrong," she said, rather coldly. "'About strangers,' I should have said, although I really think," she added, thoughtfully, "that there is a sympathy of dislike, if one can call it so."

"And so by your sympathy of dislike you knew I should be here, and by my sympathy of like I knew you would be here—and we have met."

This was flirting, of course. Even inexperienced Laline knew that quite well. There was, of course, no harm in flirting with one's own husband; but then he did not know he was that, and must be put in his place.

"I am not good at discussing abstract subjects with strangers," she said; "and, also, I must be getting back home now."

"Just a moment," he pleaded. "I know Mrs. Vandeleur will be at Lady Northlake's *conversazione*—so that she can spare you; and this keen wind is wonderfully invigorating. Don't you feel the benefit of it after the exotic atmosphere of Mrs. Vandeleur's study? Too much of that can't be good for any one, either physically or mentally; and especially," he added, glancing at her thin face and lustrous eyes—"especially bad for you."

"Why especially bad for me?"

"Because I should think you are exceptionally sensitive, Miss Grahame. What you said just now proved that—I mean about those presentiments."

"Are you exceptionally sensitive, then?" she asked, forcing a little laugh. "For, as I understand, you have presentiments, too."

"Perhaps I am," he answered, slowly, "where some people are concerned. I have an impression about you,

Miss Grahame, which is very strong indeed, and about which I want to speak to you."

For a moment Laline's heart seemed to stand still. Was he going to tell her that he had recognised her, and to show himself at last in his true colours?

"Please don't tell me!" she cried, sharply, with an unmistakable tremor in her voice. "It is late, and I am going home. Good-afternoon, Mr. Armstrong!"

"Don't go yet! Just walk once more up the avenue."

"I have not been very much about the world," Laline said, icily, "but I do not think it is customary for young ladies to walk about with strangers."

"I am not a stranger!" he said, emphatically. "Why do you look so startled, Miss Grahame? I can't believe that you and I met for the first time a week ago. If we did, why did you drop that crystal ball in consternation as soon as I entered the room, and why did I feel, as soon as I saw the lamplight on your face, that I had beheld it before? Only my recollection of you is as a child, with long bright hair waving about your shoulders, and——"

"Fancies—mere fancies!" she interrupted. "Mine is not an unusual type of face in England."

"A most unusual type, I call it," he rejoined, earnestly, "and one that I am longing to commit to paper. My body, you must know, Miss Grahame, sits before a desk in a bank all day, but in my mind I am forever drawing and painting, committing lovely scenes and lovely faces very inadequately to canvas."

"I remember," she said, in constrained tones, "that you first met Miss Cavan in a picture-gallery."

"And I remember," he returned, composedly, "how like I thought her to a Paris Bordone. Miss Cavan's colouring is very fine, and there is altogether a Venetian opulence about her appearance. If you are at all in-

terested in pictures, you will see some very good ones when you come, as I hope you will, with Mrs. Vandeleur to my uncle's house next week to tea."

"Thank you," she said, trying vainly to adopt an indifferent "society" tone. "I am unfortunately engaged that day."

"But no day was fixed," he cried; "and it must be a day on which you are not engaged! I am most anxious that you should know my uncle. You must, I think, be quite his ideal."

"How can you possibly know," she asked, "what my character may be? You forget, Mr. Armstrong, that you know absolutely nothing about me."

"It seems impossible," he said, thoughtfully, "and yet I suppose it is true, as facts go, and that I must have seen that face so like yours, with floating hair, in my dreams. But facts are the least important things in this world, Miss Grahame. It is only by reading between the lines of the facts of his life that we really know any man. A bare summary of events teaches us nothing. We live outside, or, rather, inside of what happens to us."

"Now you are talking like Mrs. Vandeleur," said Laline, interested in spite of herself.

"But don't you agree with me? Here are you and I, as far apart as two fixed stars, each within a little world wherein the other cannot hope to tread, except, perhaps, sometimes in dreams. To show you how little value facts have—I met you, as you say, a week ago for the first time; you just spoke a few words, telling me Mrs. Vandeleur was out and would soon return. I spoke to you; I don't know what I talked about, for I was feeling your presence too deeply to be coherent even before I saw your face; then a light was brought, and I learned your features by heart, every turn of every line of them, before you left the room. And, as I went out of the

house, fully an hour later, I saw your face again, pressed against the window, watching me with something in your eyes that looked like dislike and fear. To-day I meet you for the second time, and you speak to me with coldness and dislike in every note of your voice. All that is not much to go upon—is it?”

Although she hated and despised herself for it, her heart went out to him as her ear caught the ring of deep feeling in his voice.

“I don’t know what you mean!” she faltered, lamely.

“I mean that such an acquaintance as ours would seem short and slight as mere facts go. And yet the thought of you has never once left my mind since I parted from you, and the moment I close my eyes in sleep you dominate my dreams. You come to me, and in just the voice you speak in now, only less hard and cold, you tell me that something stands between us and prevents you from liking me; and just as I am urging you to tell me what the barrier is, I awake, with my question unanswered.”

“I am really not responsible for your dreams, Mr. Armstrong.”

“Yet it is your influence which suggests them. Do you never dream yourself?”

“Yes; but I attach no importance to such disconnected nonsense as dreams always are!” she said, hastily, realising, to her intense discomfiture, that she was suddenly growing crimson.

“But tell me,” he said, earnestly, “just for curiosity, as I know that you are interested in all psychic studies, whether you ever dream of strangers whom you dislike—of me, for instance?”

“It is beginning to snow,” said Laline, staring up in the sky and ignoring his question, “and I have no umbrella.”

"But I have. You must let me hold it over you."

And, almost before she guessed his intention, he had opened his umbrella and drawn her hand through his arm.

"You can't get wet now," he said.

"Would you like really to know what I think of you?" Laline asked, in a low and rather unsteady voice.

"Yes—even though I am sure it will hurt me!"

"I think," she said, with much deliberation, "that, in a very cruel and cowardly manner, you are taking advantage of the fact that I am a friendless dependant to treat me with a flirting familiarity which you would not dare to show towards a lady whom you considered your equal!"

He could feel that the hand on his arm was quivering, as was her whole frame, with excitement and anger.

"Is that what you think of me?" he asked, quietly.

"It is. And, if you wish me to retain any respect for you, or ever to speak to you when I am forced to meet you in my employer's house, you will leave me at once, Mr. Armstrong."

"Surely not in the snow, without an umbrella?" he suggested, still unmoved.

She withdrew her hand sharply from his arm, biting her lips with vexation.

"I cannot run away from you," she began.

"I should certainly run after you, and that would look absurd!" he put in.

"I shall be compelled to speak about you to Mrs. Vandeleur," Laline said, beginning to walk rapidly homewards.

"I hope and intend to speak of you to Mrs. Vandeleur very shortly," said Wallace Armstrong.

She turned and stared at him in surprise.

"You mean to speak to Mrs. Vandeleur about me? I don't understand you!"

"No; you don't in the least understand me, or you would never have spoken to me as you did just now! If you will only be good and come under the umbrella again and take my arm, I will explain. Miss Grahame, I force my attentions and my society upon you, and behave with what you call flirting familiarity, because I am not much used to courting, and it's the only method I know. Finding you here alone was far too good a chance to miss, so you must forgive me if I have hurried the pace a little. It may be a very long time before I have such an opportunity again."

"I have not the least notion of what you mean," she said, haughtily.

"Then I will speak more plainly. I have fallen in love with you, Miss Grahame. It seems to me that I have been in love with you for years; but, as you say that is impossible, I will only date it from last week. It was not only that I saw and spoke to you, but I heard your character described in a few words by Mrs. Vandeleur, who, for all her touch of charlatanism, understands the natures of those about her. Shall I tell you her words? She said you were 'a creature of perfect purity and truth, unsullied by thoughts of love or money.' Thoughts of love would only sweeten, and not sully, such a character; but let that pass. I love you, Miss Grahame, and I want in time to persuade you to love me. That is the explanation of what you call my cowardly and offensive conduct."

Laline stopped short in her walk and looked at him intently. It was past five o'clock, but the sky was lighter since the snowfall and she could see his face clearly, the broad forehead and straight nose, the square outline, firm jaw, and handsome mouth softened now into tenderness, the clear olive skin and crisply curling black hair. Every feature seemed refined and idealised

from what she remembered of the man a few years before, at which time his mouth was hidden under a heavy moustache and his brow darkened by loosely-falling hair. Only the eyes were the same in shape and colour, a clear blue, under the unusual setting of jet-black lashes and eyebrows; but in Wallace Armstrong's eyes, as they now met those of Laline's, a soft light was shining, making them unlike any she had ever yet beheld. And, as she gazed, this proud and self-reliant maiden, who so much wished to convince herself that she could never forgive this man, experienced the most unaccountable desire to creep into his arms under the protecting umbrella and whisper in his ear that she was not in the least angry with him and was really his wife all the time.

This sudden impulse Laline strongly combated. What right had this man, who knew himself to be married, to go about making love to unsuspecting girls? she asked herself, steeling her heart against him and reminding herself that to Clare also he had in all probability made similar overtures.

"I will try to forget all the absurd things you have said, Mr. Armstrong," she was beginning very gravely, when again he interrupted her.

"That is just what I don't want you to do! I want you, on the contrary, to remember every word, and to think of me when you get home, and try to get used to the idea of me. Then when you come to tea next week at my uncle's house——"

"I cannot come, as I told you, Mr. Armstrong. Dependents are not in the habit of making social calls with their employers."

"If you so greatly resent being in a position of what you call dependance, surely you will not be unwilling to change it?" he suggested.

They were close to the gates at the corner of the Gardens now, and Laline held out her hand.

"Good-bye!" she said. "I prefer to walk to the Crescent alone."

"Good-bye!" he said, and held her hand close in his. "But I can't quite let you go like this," he added, deprecatingly, still retaining her hand. "You haven't even told me whether you mean to leave off disliking me."

"I have told you before that I much object to that flirting manner!" she said, severely.

"And I have told you," he retorted, "that it's the only manner I know—or that I dare employ!" he added, in a lower voice.

"If you wish to be a friend of mine——"

"I wish to be more than a friend."

"Really, Mr. Armstrong, this is absurd! Please let my hand go at once. I cannot stand here with you like——"

"Like lovers?"

"Like two people in a Christmas number."

"I can't let you go until you promise to try and like me."

"You tell me of your dreams and presentiments and fancies," she said, with sudden fire; "perhaps I, too, have fanciful ideas about people, and in my mind may have just as much reason for disliking you as you have for liking me!"

"Not liking—loving."

"Well, and not disliking—hating!" she cried, drawing her hand sharply away from his.

"I would rather you hated me than that you were indifferent—extremes meet. You will come to my uncle's, will you not, Miss Grahame?"

"Extremes meet, but we need not!" she returned, with a sudden schoolgirl pertness, which made him burst out

laughing. Before he had recovered his gravity she had dashed past him through the park gate, and in a few minutes' time had arrived, breathless, before the doors, of 21, Queen Mary Crescent.

Up to her own room she ran as soon as Susan opened the front door.

"I declare," she exclaimed, as she saw her blushing face in the glass, "I look like a jubilant nursemaid who has just parted from her 'young man!' And so I have, I suppose; but the odd part of it is that I don't seem to feel afraid of him now. I even have a sort of sneaking regard for him—almost a liking, it might be called, if I didn't know what a fearfully bad man he is. He must be a marvellously clever actor, for he doesn't look in the least cruel or callous, or like a forger or drunkard or bully. I remember I always thought that he was very handsome, and that he had the most beautiful blue eyes. I suppose he must have come right over to England when I disappeared, and persuaded his uncle to forgive him, and reformed. He half-recognised me as soon as he saw me; but he doesn't realise that growing up and putting my hair up have altered me just as shaving his moustache and having his hair cut have altered him. He must know the truth sooner or later, I suppose, and then—will he be glad or sorry, I wonder? Now, of course, he makes love to any girl he pleases, knowing quite well that he is safely married, though nobody suspects it. But if I were to turn upon him in a majestic way and say, 'Sir, I am your wife already!' he wouldn't perhaps be quite so pleased. And, by-the-bye, in all his talk he never committed himself by mentioning marriage, which was very artful of him!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN spite of Wallace Armstrong's entreaties, Laline could not alter her arrangement not to make the acquaintance of Alexander Wallace; for when Mrs. Vandeleur fixed upon the following Wednesday as the afternoon on which she would call at the bank, the young secretary had already announced to her employer her wish to remain at home.

"You are very right," the little lady had observed, "to avoid Mr. Armstrong if his society is uncongenial to you. Those strong instincts of liking and of hating are given to us women as safeguards. Although to my mind Mr. Armstrong is wholly sympathetic, if a secret voice tells you to beware of him, it is that of some beneficent spirit of the so-called dead, who see with fleshless eyes through the fleshly veil into the soul, and know that this man's society would be in some way harmful to you."

Laline was growing accustomed by this time to Mrs. Vandeleur's singular methods of expression. A strong liking had grown up between them, although the elder woman was hardly sufficiently human in her ways of thought to constitute a true friend. But Laline dared not confide in her, for many reasons, so she let her statements pass without comment. So far from cherishing any sentiment of repulsion against Wallace Armstrong, she could hardly keep her thoughts from dwelling on the subject of his tender speeches and tenderer eyes; and it was only by constantly reminding herself of the mean and cowardly trick by which he had become her husband that she was enabled to preserve any lingering resentment against him.

On the Tuesday evening before Mrs. Vandeleur's promised visit to Mr. Wallace's house Laline received the first approach to a love letter she had ever had despatched to her. Dinner was over, and she was engaged in writing in the study at Mrs. Vandeleur's dictation, when the postman's knock preluded the tap at the door of Susan and her entrance with a salver, upon which were two letters, one for the mistress of the house, and the other for Miss Lina Grahame.

"A letter for you, my child," said the elder lady, peering at the address through her eye-glass—"the first you have received since your arrival."

Long before Laline had opened it or even glanced at the handwriting on the envelope, she knew that Wallace Armstrong was her correspondent, and felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair under Mrs. Vandeleur's critical scrutiny.

"Do you know the writing?" the latter asked; and Laline replied with perfect truth that she had never seen it before.

"My dear Miss Grahame," the letter began—"I am writing to entreat you to come with Mrs. Vandeleur to-morrow. Even if you don't like me you would most certainly like my uncle, who is one of the noblest and best of men, generous and forgiving to a fault, and one who, in spite of his wealth, has suffered many deep and bitter trials in what to him has been far more important than money, his domestic affection. He is very old and very lonely, though with his chivalrous kindness towards all women he is the very man who should by rights be surrounded by a happy family circle. I owe everything to him, and can hardly with a lifelong devotion repay his more than fatherly goodness. I am sure that you are gentle and pitiful as you are beautiful—'fair, kind,

and true,' as Shakspeare puts it. And, being all these things, won't you come, Miss Grahame, and, by giving yourself just a little trouble, and putting up for an hour or more with the presence of some one you hate, confer a great pleasure upon one of the best old men alive? I solemnly promise not to 'flirt,' as you call it. If I may not talk to you, I will console myself by talking of you to Mrs. Vandeleur, which is the next best thing. In my dream last night you promised to come. Be as sweet as your dream-prototype is the prayer of yours always devotedly,

“WALLACE L. ARMSTRONG.”

This letter moved and interested Laline deeply. Since it was now impossible for her to accompany Mrs. Vandeleur and her niece, she felt that she must send a few words in answer, lest she might be thought too unfeeling. She was also very anxious to prevent Wallace from carrying out his threat of talking about her to Mrs. Vandeleur. The latter had guessed already that she was a married woman; and might she not be capable of hinting as much to Mr. Armstrong under the mistaken impression that his attentions would be disagreeable to her secretary?

Lost in thought, Laline bent over the letter which lay on her lap, ignoring the steady, curious gaze of Mrs. Vandeleur's keen, dark eyes. The fact that it was absolutely the first letter she had ever received from her husband excited her strangely, and she found herself fingering the paper with a touch that was almost affectionate. It seemed a little in the light of a confession that Wallace should expatiate so much upon his uncle's generous and forgiving nature and fatherly goodness, and on his lonely life and domestic troubles.

“I believe—I want to believe that Wallace has utterly

changed," she said to herself, with flushed cheeks and moist eyes. "If he were anything like the man he was four years and a half ago, when he entered into that horrible bargain with my father, he could never have written this letter. His uncle's goodness must have changed him by gradually softening his heart. And then—my father was so much older that he may have led him into things, and Wallace was penniless—perhaps I have been too hard in my judgment on him all these years, although I am afraid if it were all to happen again I should act in just the same way."

"Have you any letters to write, dear child?" Mrs. Vandeleur's silvery tones broke in. "I shall be sending Susan to the post with mine within the next half-hour."

"There is just one I want to write, if you please," the secretary answered.

And Mrs. Vandeleur obligingly made room for her at the other end of her writing-table.

Laline took a pen between her fingers; but the letter was not so easily written. There was very much she wished to tell Wallace Armstrong, and very much again that she did not want him to know. She wanted to tell him that she would willingly come to see his uncle, since he so much desired it, but that, having once refused, she did not see her way to changing her mind without exciting comment. She would also have liked him to know that she by no means hated him, that she might even in time be induced to like him very much, but that if he wished to please her he must refrain from talking about her to Mrs. Vandeleur.

But she had no idea how to word her letter, and, even before writing it, she began to rack her brains in the vain endeavour to remember whether her husband possessed or had ever seen any of her handwriting.

Finally, having wasted more than ten minutes, she seized her pen and began the heading, "Dear Mr. Armstrong," hoping that other words would come.

A little laugh, like that of a mischievous fairy, made her start and drop the pen.

"'Dear Mr. Armstrong,' and nothing more?" Mrs. Vandeleur asked, mockingly. "That is not a very fluent love-letter for the poor young gentleman, is it?"

Laline looked at once astonished and confused. But Mrs. Vandeleur's prescience in this case was easily explained. She had recognised the writing on the envelope of Wallace's letter, and had watched Laline's fingers tracing three words, which she guessed to be those she quoted.

"You seem in a difficulty over your letter," the little lady suggested, in an insinuating tone. "Can I not help you in any way? I have some judgment, and my advice may be of value to you. What is it you want to say to Mr. Armstrong?"

Laline arose, agitated and nervous, and, tearing her letter across, dropped it in the fire.

"It isn't a bit necessary to send it at all," she said; "and that is what made it difficult to write. I met Mr. Armstrong in Kensington Gardens while you were out last Saturday afternoon, and I told him I did not wish to accompany you and Miss Cavan to tea at Mr. Alexander Wallace's. But he took it into his head to want me to go, and wrote to especially ask me. I wanted to write and say I couldn't change my mind—that is all."

"You mean that is all you are going to tell me?"

"I mean that is all that happened."

"Does Clare know?"

"Clare? Oh, no! Why should she?"

Mrs. Vandeleur shook her head.

"You know what I read in the cards about you yester-

day," she said, mysteriously. "You must beware of the evil done by a red-haired woman and a black-haired man. Lina, tell me—is Wallace Armstrong in love with you?"

"How can he be when he has seen so little of me?" she asked, parrying the question, and partly vexed, partly glad to talk upon the subject.

Mrs. Vandeleur studied the girl's face through her eye-glasses. There was something about it which she did not understand and which she mistrusted. It was not yet the tremulous softness of love she read in the girl's lowered eyes and lips curved into a half-smile; but there was about her a look suggesting that she was secretly happy and amused over some knowledge she did not mean to share with others.

"You cannot love him, Lina," Mrs. Vandeleur reminded her, softly. "You are not free."

"No," Laline repeated—and her half-smile deepened—"I am not free. And now we won't talk about him, will we, dear Mrs. Vandeleur? And I sha'n't write the letter; I shall just stop away."

"Do you wish to go?"

Laline's lips were framing "No," when she stopped.

"I hardly know," she said, after a pause. "But I think I should like to go."

"I shall be strangely disappointed in you, Lina," said Mrs. Vandeleur, coldly, "if you encourage Mr. Armstrong to love you solely for vanity's sake."

The girl knelt down at Mrs. Vandeleur's feet and gazed earnestly up into her face.

"Trust me, dear Mrs. Vandeleur," she said, "for I shall never do that! But—but I heard a good deal about Mr. Armstrong before I came to your house at all, and there is much more about him that I want to find out."

"Does he know that you had any previous acquaintance with him?"

"He has no idea of it."

"He doesn't recognise you? That's strange! Was he at all in love with you before?"

"Oh, no!" the girl answered, with a very sad little smile. "If he had been——"

She did not finish her speech. In her own mind she was saying that, if Wallace Armstrong had indeed loved her at Boulogne, she would have been living by his side as his wife all these years in that very house to which she was bidden as a guest on the following day.

"Does Wallace Armstrong know your husband?" Mrs. Vandeleur asked, suddenly.

The blood swept over Laline's face as she answered,—

"Yes."

"And you want to find out about him?" pursued Mrs. Vandeleur. "Surely, if you detest and dread him so much, it would be wiser to restrain your curiosity."

"I want also to learn, if I can, whether my father is alive."

Mrs. Vandeleur threw up her little hands and sighed.

"Like all women," she murmured—"hankering after chains and slavery after being once freed from them. Our work together should absorb you, to the exclusion of such thoughts. But you shall go with me to-morrow, if you like. I knew that Wallace Armstrong's spirit was too fine to assimilate with that of Clare. Her destiny will lead her, late in life, to the arms of some stout and bald-headed stock-broker. When he is asleep, after dinner, she will flirt with his clerks or his partner, and be very happy; but you—life holds something very different in store for you. I suppose you must dree your weird. But remember, once you let love come into your life, trouble—terrible trouble—will come too!"

Secretly, Mrs. Vandeleur was very curious to see Laline and Wallace together. She interested herself

readily in other people's affairs when these latter attracted her in any way—she liked to constitute herself a sort of *deus ex machina* in the lives of her friends, to pull the strings which moved their destinies; and the fact that both Laline and Wallace, whom she sincerely admired, declined to confide in her wholly, piqued her curiosity the more.

Against her niece Clare, on the other hand, Mrs. Vandeleur entertained a sentiment which was almost dislike; and she was annoyed to notice, on the following afternoon, when the two girls came down into the hall, ready dressed for their drive, that Clare, in a picturesque costume of red-brown cloth and beaver fur, appeared far more strikingly handsome at first sight than Laline, in the quietest of blue serge gowns and small black felt hat.

“Why have you those horrid, plain, masculine clothes on?” she inquired crossly of her secretary.

“They are my only walking things,” Laline replied. “You know, dear Mrs. Vandeleur, I can't pay an afternoon call in those trailing white garments I wear in your room.”

“Dear Lina would look like a ghost dropping into afternoon tea!” purred Clare, happy under the becoming framework of a red-brown velvet “picture” hat and feathers. “I think she looks so sweet and neat in that dear little black felt hat and black cloth jacket!”

Mrs. Vandeleur snapped her glasses to and shut her mouth very hard. Then she ordered the girls into the brougham, and gave the coachman some order which they did not hear, but in consequence of which he drew up before a particularly smart millinery establishment on the way to the Strand.

Here Mrs. Vandeleur insisted that Laline should get out with her while Clare remained in the carriage, to

which the little lady presently returned in triumph by the side of her secretary, in whose appearance a transformation had taken place by the substitution of a costly black velvet "picture" hat and graceful black velvet cape, trimmed with fur and lined with wine-coloured silk, for her former dowdy garments.

A flash of genuine anger passed into Clare's green eyes; but she was far too much afraid of her aunt to enter a protest, and declared, with apparent enthusiasm, that "dear Lina looked perfectly lovely; but then she looked that before!"

Wallace's Bank was a vast gloomy-looking building, of which a considerable frontage faced the Strand. It was built in a square, with a paved courtyard in the middle, which led from one portion of the Bank to the other. Alexander Wallace possessed many commodious houses in different parts of London, and notably a charming family mansion and estate at Hampstead. But he hated change and he hated moving a little more every year. His father and his grandfather had lived over the Bank, and what was good enough for them was good enough for him. His tastes were very simple, and in his personal expenses he was economical almost to miserliness; but his kindness of heart and generosity in cases of real distress were well known.

A sedate elderly man-servant opened the big doors which led into the private portion of the house, and the visitors found themselves in a small but very lofty hall, papered in old-fashioned unæsthetic drab, in which a fire was burning. Would the ladies mind coming up-stairs? the man asked, and proceeded to lead the way up several short flights of winding stairs and through a labyrinth of passages to a door, before which he paused.

"These are Mr. Armstrong's rooms," he explained, and forthwith showed the ladies into a good-sized apart-

ment, distinguished by an appearance of extreme cosiness and bachelor comfort. The cheeriest of fires burned within the wide hearth, the furniture was of the saddle-bag order, roomy, and easy-giving, plush curtains drawn over the windows kept out all glimpse of the snowy night, and a multitude of clever water-colour sketches, chiefly of picturesque foreign scenery and of pretty girls, covered all the available wall space.

On a round table, set unfashionably in the centre of the room, a tempting array of cakes and sweets awaited the visitors; and the two occupants of the room—Wallace Armstrong and his uncle Alexander Wallace—rose at the visitors' entrance and advanced to greet them.

Laline's heart beat fast as she was formally introduced to the man who had long ago by letter welcomed her so warmly as a daughter. She felt she hardly dared to look up into his face lest he should read her secret in her eyes; but when she did at last summon up sufficient courage to do so, she was struck by the extreme benevolence of the old Scotchman's regard. Light gray eyes, at once keen and kind, looked out from his pale and deeply-furrowed face, which possessed but little of his nephew's beauty of outline. In spite of his great wealth, the banker's manner towards the three ladies was constrained and even shy, but full of a gentleness and consideration which won the heart of Laline.

"How kind a father he might have been to me all these years!" she thought.

CHAPTER XIV.

It seemed to Laline that Wallace Armstrong made no attempt to disguise the look of triumphant delight which spread over his face when she placed her hand in his.

"I was so afraid you wouldn't come!" he murmured.

"I was much pleased to accept your kind invitation," she returned, demurely, while Clare shot a quick glance of jealous inquiry from one to the other.

Miss Cavan could not, however, complain that the companion whose presence she so much objected to endeavoured in any way to outshine her in conversation. Laline scarcely spoke at all during tea, at which meal she presided behind the tea-urn, her manipulation of which filled Wallace with secret rapture. There was something so delightfully domestic in the sight of her slim wrists peeping from her neat blue-serge sleeves as she filled the cups, something so suggestive of honeymoon-breakfasts and little *tête-à-tête* meals on winter evenings, that it was as much as he could do to refrain from springing from his seat and proposing to her there and then, and prefacing his remarks with a kiss on each enchanting wrist.

Old Mr. Wallace sat stroking his silver-gray beard and gazing with much satisfaction on the assembled guests after they had taken their place round the tea-table. At length he turned to Mrs. Vandeleur, and addressed her in his usual slow tones, marked by a strong Scotch accent.

"I believe, madam," he said, "that I am very much behind the times. But I am an old man, and I live in a very old house and carry on a very old business, and that must be my excuse. My boy Wallace humours me ;

he knows I like a table to be where I'm used to seeing it—in the middle of the room—and the chairs drawn up round it, and so he puts it there. And now I am wondering whether the two charming young ladies you have brought with you to-day will humour me too?"

"In what, Mr. Armstrong?"

"Would they take off their hats while they are here?" he asked, with a wistful eagerness which touched Laline deeply. "You see," he added, apologetically, "this is not a fashionable call, and there are no fashionable people to meet you. And when I see young people about me without their hats it makes me feel for the time that they are not only visitors, but my own family."

Long before he had finished speaking Laline had removed her hat, much to Wallace's delight, and had confided it to him to place on one side for her, thus enabling him to feast his eyes upon her white brow and soft hair, waving in Madonna-like fashion over her temples and across the tips of her little pink ears.

"Have you no women-relations at all, then?" Mrs. Vandeleur inquired.

Alexander Wallace sighed and shook his head.

"None that I see now," he answered. "Of my twin-sisters, one, this boy's mother, is dead, and the other has married for the second time and lives in South America. Of my two nieces—this boy's sisters—one is dead, and the other married a German baron and lives with him in the Black Forest. I never see any of them. Once, more than four years ago, I expected a daughter to come into my house as my nephew's wife, a gentle and beautiful young girl, whom I longed to welcome to my heart. But it was not to be."

"Don't speak of that now, Uncle Alec," put in Wallace, quickly, throwing an uneasy glance in the direction of his guests; "it only makes you unhappy to recall that time!"

Laline watched both men with a fluttering heart. It was quite clear that Wallace wished to keep his uncle from the topic of the niece who never arrived, and as patent that the old gentleman was anxious to prose on the subject to sympathetic feminine listeners. The younger man at once strove to create a diversion by drawing Mrs. Vandeleur's attention to his sketches on the walls of the room; but old Mr. Wallace, who was very obstinate, returned to his former subject before the little lady had had time to express an opinion.

"This boy thinks of nothing but art and society, spelt with capital letters, you must know, Mrs. Vandeleur!" he broke in, testily. "I am fond of good pictures myself; but pictures won't fill an empty house with sunshine and laughter. That is what this house wants— young voices, music, and pattering feet to drive the ghosts away. My niece Laline would have been twenty-one by this time. I had prepared one entire floor for her at the Hampstead house, as well as three rooms here on the floor below this. Just what I thought a very young newly-married woman would like I put there—the newest novels, and fresh flowers, and pretty hangings, and cut-glass scent-bottles, and plenty of looking-glasses—all pretty girls like looking-glasses, and plain ones, too, for the matter of that. And I bought a canary for her, and a white Persian kitten, and a King Charles spaniel; that was the popular dog that year, and I know girls like pets and prefer them to be in the fashion. Then, when everything was prepared, and I was counting the hours until my nephew brought home his wife, I received a telegram to say that at the moment of starting she had been seized with typhoid fever and was already dangerously ill."

"How terribly sad!" ejaculated Mrs. Vandeleur, politely, while Clare yawned furtively, and Laline kept

her eyes fixed on her plate lest they might betray her.

"You are making Mrs. Vandeleur quite miserable, Uncle Alec," put in Wallace, his black brows contracting into an impatient frown.

"My boy," observed his uncle, doggedly, "I am telling a story and I have not yet finished. As you know the end and do not appear to want to hear it again, I should advise you to make a tour of the room with the young ladies and show them your sketches!"

Clare rose with alacrity; but Laline declared that she preferred to listen to Mr. Wallace; so, much against his will, Mr. Armstrong had to pair off with Miss Cavan. Laline could see clearly how he tried to catch his uncle's words, even while conducting Clare round the walls and explaining to her his various drawings; but her interest was so centred in the story told by old Mr. Wallace that she had little attention to spare for his nephew.

"Constant telegrams were sent to me," the old gentleman proceeded, in great satisfaction at securing so absorbed a listener as Laline, "and I was making arrangements for going over to see for myself that the poor girl had the best of nursing, when I received a message telling me that my niece had succumbed to the disease and was already dead. Only seventeen, and a bride of a few weeks! It was indeed a cruel blow! But the part that especially grieved me, and of which I never think without the keenest self-reproach, is that when my nephew first arrived in Europe from the Colonies he was in dire straits for money and too proud to apply to me. His poor little bride had relatives in the town of Boulogne, and thither they made their way; but these relations were extremely poor and could do little for them. One of them, a Captain Garth, wrote me a most touching letter after the poor child's death—which I fear was

hastened by the privations she had undergone—in which he detailed her last moments and her pitiful disappointment at not being able to see her beautiful English home. Poor little Laline! No one mourned her more sincerely than I. Her rooms in this house and at Hampstead have never been used since that time, and never will be until my nephew marries.”

“You wish him to marry, then?” Mrs. Vandeleur suggested.

“Most earnestly I do. But, though I have nothing to complain of about him, and he is making amends to me in every way for the terrible trouble I have had, he seems strangely averse to settling down, and talks a great deal about failing to meet his ideal, and not being able to put up with any one else, and so on. Young men nowadays are too fond of talking about themselves and their feelings; and this boy is so popular, and gets invited out so much, that in the multitudes of fresh pretty faces he is constantly meeting he is in danger, I fear, of frittering his time away. Boating-parties in summer, perpetual racing and punting, riding, tennis, and golf, and in the winter balls and skating-parties—his time is so filled up that he doesn’t have a moment left for love-making. With all that, he’s an excellent man of business and invaluable to me at the Bank. Oh, I have nothing to complain of about the boy!”

To Laline’s sensitive ears there was something a little disparaging in Alexander Wallace’s praise of his nephew, some note which almost suggested that he regretted not being able to find fault with him. For her own part, the knowledge of her husband’s deceitful treachery towards his over-indulgent uncle filled her with disgust, and she had been hardly able to restrain her indignation when Alexander Wallace alluded to Captain Garth’s “pathetic letter” containing his “niece” Laline’s last

words. Unable to account for her disappearance, and unwilling to give themselves the trouble of searching for her, it was clear to Laline that her father and her husband had invented the story of her seizure and death by typhoid fever in order to extract further sympathy and further funds from the kind and credulous old banker, and she grew hot with shame to think that she should have almost allowed herself to pardon and to like a man so mercenary and deceitful as Wallace Armstrong must be.

"Would you like to look over the house, Miss Grahame? There are some rather interesting rooms, one especially, in which a great ball was given on the very day when that prodigious swindle, the South Sea Bubble, burst. It is called the 'South Sea Room,' and has a wonderful Chinese paper; I think it would interest you."

It was her husband's voice, and a little shiver of repulsion passed through Laline at the sound. Nevertheless she rose, and Alexander Wallace rose also. Adams, the discreet-looking man-servant, was summoned with his key, and the tour of the old house began.

Clare Cavan was inquisitive. Moreover, she fully intended, if that were possible, installing herself as mistress in this gloomy old mansion at some future date. She therefore peered and peeped about her, noting the size and number of the rooms, and perpetually asking questions in what seemed like overflowing girlish vivacity. Mr. Armstrong's suite of apartments comprised the sitting-room, in which tea had been served, a bedroom and dressing-room adjoining, and up another flight of stairs, a spacious studio, lighted entirely from above, and containing casts, clay models, canvases, easels, and innumerable sketches placed along the dado of the room, the walls of which were painted Indian-red. To

this room, at Clare's urgent request, Wallace conducted the two girls, passing, as he did so, the closed door of another attic of equal dimensions.

"Is this another studio of yours?" Clare inquired, stopping before the closed door.

"It is a disused lumber-room," Wallace answered, "and kept locked, as you see," he added, shaking the handle of the door before leading the way into his studio adjoining.

Clare lingered behind the other two and bent to examine the keyhole.

"It may be locked," she said to herself, "but the key is on the inside. I wonder why Mr. Armstrong tried to deceive me? Is it some pretty model he is keeping here on the sly?"

Resolved to settle this point to her own satisfaction so soon as an opportunity should arise, Clare followed the others into the studio, and affected great admiration of Wallace's sketches, which were in truth far too fanciful and unconventional to arouse her interest.

"This is where my heart is," he said to Laline on her first introduction to the studio; "or, rather"—glancing quickly round and perceiving that Clare had not yet joined them—"this is where it was."

Laline glanced at him coldly and turned to examine some drawings. Nothing, she told herself, should ever induce her to forgive him; but his pictures interested her, and especially a pencil sketch, as yet uncompleted, of extreme delicacy and beauty, entitled "Evelyn Hope."

The figure of the dead girl, exquisitely youthful and pure in outline, lay stretched upon the bed, touched and glorified by two long rays of light that stole through the hinges of the close shutters. A dark-haired young man sat, with face averted from the spectator, gazing intently

at the still white figure, into whose hand he was gently thrusting a single geranium leaf.

“ ‘So hush—I will give you this leaf to keep!

See—I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!

There—that is our secret; go to sleep.

You will wake and remember and understand.’ ”

Wallace came behind Laline as she stood before the easel examining the picture, and softly quoted Brown-ing’s lines, which she had never heard before, and which touched her with a keen delight.

“I should like to read you the entire poem,” he said.

“But who did you take for your heroine—I mean, who sat for it?”

“No one. It was a memory. I did it on my return from that walk in Kensington Gardens.”

He spoke very low, so as not to be heard by Clare, who was at the farther end of the room turning over some sketches in a portfolio against the wall. Laline had already recognised her own profile in “Evelyn Hope,” and was not ill-pleased by the dreamy loveliness which characterised the drawing.

She learned that Wallace frequently exhibited at the minor picture-shows, and, further, that he was a regular contributor of black-and-white drawings to more than one English and American magazine.

“You see I can’t give the work the time I would like,” he explained, “though luckily banking hours are not onerous. I sit down-stairs from ten until four, with a calculating-machine clicking away in my brain; but in the early summer mornings or the long winter evenings I bring my heart and mind up here.”

At this point Clare, tired of a conversation which was no longer specially addressed to her, suggested a move to the South Sea Room, which she declared herself

"dying to see;" and to the first floor they forthwith descended to a vast apartment, with floor of shining polished oak and an immense mantelpiece in carved and coloured marble, an apartment in which the electric-light, shining down from bosses in the elaborately-carved ceiling, seemed a glaring anachronism, and in which a few old-fashioned chairs and sofas, covered with moth-eaten brocade and set in far corners of the room, suggested ghostly dowagers and wall-flowers silently watching a rustling fleshless ball.

Mrs. Vandeleur was delighted, and went about with upraised eye-glasses, "sniffing the air for ghosts," as Clare irreverently whispered to Wallace Armstrong.

"You have done your very worst," the little lady observed with much severity to old Alexander, "with your odious glaring electric-light. And, as I perceive, some Vandal forefather of yours has gilded and whitened over all the lovely woodwork of the ceiling! As to your dreadful Chinese wall-paper, sticky with varnish and most inartistic and patchy in effect, I haven't a doubt that it is plastered all over the original beautiful oak-panelled walls, and that the spirits of the malevolent little pigtailed horrors who designed and executed it have driven away all the dear, charming, picturesque people in patches and powder and stiff brocade who used to congregate here a hundred years ago. I declare I can hardly hear a rustle of their silk petticoats or a tap of their high-heeled shoes!"

"If you hear as much as that, madam, you are cleverer than I," said the old Scotchman, drily.

"If I had my way with this room," pursued Mrs. Vandeleur, "I'd have all the paper and all the paint and varnish off, and take down your nasty electric-light and substitute wax candles. And I would have an old spinet in the corner and play it softly in the evenings, until I

had reconstituted the entire scene. As it is, it hurts me to see a place so desecrated. Is there no corner in the entire house left sacred for the poor spirits to come back to and feel themselves at home?"

But here Adams, who had been listening, equally scared and scandalised, interposed to suggest that if the lady liked old things she might admire the banqueting-hall, which had never yet been "properly restored;" and thither he led the way, followed by Mrs. Vandeleur, still intent upon demonstrating to the old Scotchman his enormities and that of his predecessors in the arrangement of the old rooms.

Laline, who had been examining with interest the odd designs upon the walls, turned to follow her employer; but Clare had already gone out, and Wallace detained her as she tried to pass him.

"Don't go yet!" he whispered, quickly. "I must speak to you. Why are you so cold to me again to-day?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Armstrong! Remember, we are strangers."

"We are not! Feel my heart!"—and, suddenly seizing her hand, he pressed it against his heart, so that she felt its quick strong throbs. "Could a stranger make my heart beat like this? Miss Grahame—Lina——Oh, I don't mind if you are angry! You are Lina to me in my thoughts and dreams. Lina, why do you try so hard to hate me? For you are trying; I can see it in your eyes, which seek mine until you hastily avert them; I can feel it in your hand, which half returns my pressure before you snatch your fingers from me. Lina, why do you try to steel your heart against me? What have I done, dear, that you should refuse to follow your heart and love me as I love you?"

CHAPTER XV.

A SUDDEN rage seized Laline against both Wallace and herself. She hated herself for tolerating and even liking him, and she hated him for what she regarded as his unparalleled duplicity.

"You are asking me a great many questions!" she said, turning a white, angry face upon him. "Now I want to question you! Tell me, if you have the slightest regard for truth—do you know of no tie, no responsibility, which should prevent you from making love to me?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, falling back a step and speaking in low troubled tones, quite unlike the passionate accents of his first love-avowal.

"You answer my question by asking another!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot impatiently. "What I want you to tell me is this—is there nothing and no one to stand between us—no barrier which should keep you and me apart?"

The flush of excitement faded from his dark face, which in a moment seemed to age and grow stern and sad. For the first time he averted his eyes from hers.

"What have you heard?" he asked, abruptly.

"Tell me the truth," she said, "and then I will tell you whether it is what I have heard."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"It is for you to decide," he said at last, in a very low voice. "If what you have learned about a tie, a responsibility, which I undertook more than four years ago, is sufficient to part us, I must bow to your decision. I cannot undo what I have done."

"You are not free!" she whispered, as he turned away.

"I am free to love you!" he cried, suddenly clasping her hands in his and drawing them up against his heart again. "Lina, we can't talk here, and I can see that we have both much to say. On Saturday your time is your own, is it not? Well, Saturday next I will come to you so soon as you are free. What time shall it be? Two o'clock or half-past two? Fix the time, or I shall burst in before you have finished luncheon!"

"You cannot come to the house for me," exclaimed Laline—"it is out of the question! What do you imagine you could say to Mrs. Vandeleur and her niece to explain such conduct—'If you please, ma'am, I understand it's your secretary's afternoon out, and I've come to take her out walking?' Do you really suppose that earning one's living quite destroys one's sense of what is due to the position of a lady?"

"Don't be angry, Lina," he was beginning, when she cut him short again.

"I will not permit you to call me by my Christian name, Mr. Armstrong!"

"As you like. At what time shall I call for you on Saturday?"

"Call for me? It is out of the question! I would not for the world let Mrs. Vandeleur know of your silly conduct!"

"Well, we'll keep her in the dark at present, if you wish it, although I would far rather go direct to her and tell her I fell in love with you at first sight. I feel sure she'd sympathise. I'll be waiting, then, just by the little gate that leads into the Gardens—the gate by which we came out last time. At two o'clock I will be there; and, if you are not there by the half-hour, I will go to the house and ask for you."

"This is persecution——"

"No—it is love! Lina, I hear footsteps on the stairs. There is no real barrier between us. In another moment we shall be interrupted. Kiss me, dear—just once first!"

"Mr. Armstrong, you are insulting!"

He bent his handsome, eager, dark face close down towards her own; and that ill-regulated little heart of hers began to tremble and flutter as though this man were not a heartless deceiver and an utterly worthless person.

After all he was her husband, and kissing one's husband is not considered a crime; added to which, she was almost afraid she loved him a little. Half insensibly her head inclined towards his, and in another moment their lips would have met, when Clare Cavan darted at astonishing speed into the room, and stood before them, wide-eyed and panting, her brilliant flesh-tints changed for a chalky pallor, and abject fear clearly marked in every line of her face.

"I've had a fright!" she faltered. "I—I wanted to have another look at those lovely sketches of yours, Mr. Armstrong; so I stole up-stairs to the top floor by myself, and—somehow I had forgotten—and I opened the wrong door!"

"The wrong door?" Wallace repeated, with a clearly startled expression in his eyes. "Do you mean that you went into the lumber-room? Wasn't the door locked?"

"Yes—no—that is to say, I fell over a box or something near the door, and slipped and hurt myself in the dark! And, being very absurdly nervous, it gave me such a shock!"

Laline glanced at Clare and then at Mr. Armstrong. It was clear that Clare was lying, and equally clear that

he knew it. There was nothing for him to do, however, but to express his regret at her accident, and to suggest that a glass of wine or a little brandy might assist in restoring her nerves—a proposition to which Clare assented without much protest; and the three proceeded to the dining-room together.

Here they found Mrs. Vandeleur inspecting the choicest curiosity of the bank—a centenarian clerk, who had been employed there for over eighty-five years, and who invariably alluded to his septuagenarian employer as “Master Alec.”

“I’ve been here, man and boy, for nigh on eighty-six years,” he was piping, as Wallace and the young ladies entered, “and disgrace has only once come upon the bank since I entered it! That was Master Wallace, to be sure. Oh, he’s quiet enough now—butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth! But he’s a rank bad ’un—a rank bad ’un; and so I’ve always told Master Alec! Never trust him is what I’ve always said. Wine or whiskey, women or money, he can’t resist any of ’em, for all he looks so quiet. He’s a bad man, sir—a bad man is Wallace Armstrong!”

Laline heard every word, and turned to look at Wallace. He flushed and lowered his eyes under her inquiring gaze. Presently, drawing her apart, he confided to her in a whisper that old Farquharson was “quite off his head, and hadn’t a notion what he was talking about.”

A little later the ladies left, after being pressed by old Mr. Wallace to fix an early date for another visit, and drove home through the snow-covered streets in the early gloom of a winter’s evening.

Clare was unusually quiet on the return journey; and it was only after the girls had retired to their rooms that night that she crept into Laline’s room, looking

very ghostly in her loose white flannel dressing-gown, with her long reddish-gold hair falling about her shoulders.

"Aren't you longing to know about my ghost-fright this evening?" she asked. "Of course I didn't tell Mr. Armstrong the truth. The fact is he's got some one in that other room he's keeping quiet—some one who rushed out at me in the dark with a sort of curse, and threw me out of the room. It was a woman, of course, and I suppose she was jealous, and that would account for her savagery."

"Clare," exclaimed Laline, "are you inventing this? How can I tell that you are speaking the truth now?"

For answer Clare slipped off her dressing-gown, and, pushing up the sleeve of her night-dress, displayed four black bruises, as of finger-marks, on the dazzling whiteness of her shoulder.

Laline uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Clare, why didn't you tell Mr. Armstrong?"

"I don't think he would much have relished that!" Clare answered, with a disagreeable smile. "I am afraid, Laline, that he is a dreadfully bad lot—too bad even for me! There were lots of little things I noticed. For one, that the keys of the wine and of the spirits also were kept in old Mr. Wallace's possession. He doesn't even trust his nephew with a bottle of wine; for, when the sideboard was opened in the sitting-room, where we had tea, I particularly noticed that there were no bottles there. That might not mean anything if I hadn't heard that Mr. Armstrong drinks terribly at times. I think that must be the reason for that sort of sad saturnine look he gets in his eyes sometimes. I've noticed it before in people who drink. And then you know what old Farquharson said about him, and he ought to know."

"He's so old that I think he's lost his wits," said La-

line. "Anyhow, it's rather hard to suppose a man is a drunkard simply because there are no bottles about his rooms."

"Why, I thought you didn't like Mr. Armstrong," Clare exclaimed, innocently, "and here you are defending him! This is a change indeed! Was he so very agreeable to-day as to destroy your old prejudice, or did the sight of the house and the banking business soften your hard heart towards him?"

There was no mistaking the unkindness of the sneer in this instance. Clare was indeed so profoundly jealous at the kind of understanding which she thought she had detected between Laline and Wallace during the latter part of the afternoon that her ordinary sweetness of manner was for the time forgotten. But Laline was in no mood for quarrelling. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts and plans; so she contented herself with observing that Mr. Armstrong certainly improved on acquaintance, but that he appeared to have acquired, rightly or wrongly, a bad reputation. Then she yawned, and asked Clare to put out the candle before she left the room, upon which hint to retire Miss Cavan in considerable indignation acted.

All through Thursday and Friday and the morning of Saturday, Laline was going over in her mind the conversation she meant to have with Wallace Armstrong when she joined him at the gate of the Gardens that afternoon.

Concerning the lumber-room incident, she hardly felt justified in questioning him, so little reliance did she place upon Clare's statements. There was no doubt that Miss Cavan had been violently ejected from a room which Wallace had declared to be empty; but even now Laline's keen susceptibilities taught her that Clare was concealing something. As to the rumour concerning Wallace's

occasional excesses, that was to Laline a far more serious matter. Long ago Captain Garth had styled him a drunkard, and Laline well remembered the copious and constant draughts of cognac in which her husband had indulged at Boulogne. But of these excesses there seemed no trace in Wallace's present manner. Save for the sudden infatuation he had conceived for her, and for an occasionally dreamy and fanciful habit of speech, there was nothing about him to suggest that he was not the sanest and most well-conducted of athletic and art-loving young English gentlemen.

The more she thought about Wallace the less she understood him; and what puzzled her most of all was that, while he admitted the fact of a responsibility he had incurred more than four years ago, he should still continue to pay her his addresses, without apparently ever troubling his head with the consideration that he was a married man.

Saturday dawned in clear cold sunshine, an ideal winter's day. Most fortunately for Laline, Clare was engaged to lunch at a friend's house, and afterwards to accompany a skating-party on the Long Water. Mrs. Vandeleur was absent-minded and absorbed in taking notes to be used at an interview with a very celebrated American spiritualist who was to visit her that afternoon, and by two o'clock there was nothing in the world to prevent Laline from walking out of the house to fulfil her appointment.

For the first time in her life she felt inclined to linger before her looking-glass, arranging and rearranging the set of her new hat, wondering whether she would look prettier with a regular curled fringe instead of the natural waves of hair which shaded her brow, taking her veil on and off because she was not quite sure that it suited her, desperately anxious to look her best, and

wholly dissatisfied with her appearance, in spite of the fact that she had never in her life looked half so handsome as she did now, with a bright light of excitement in her hazel eyes and the pink colour coming and going in her cheeks.

So beautiful indeed did she appear to the love-stricken Wallace, waiting for her by the gate, as arranged, that the sight of her almost took his breath away.

"By Jove, you are lovely!" he exclaimed, half under his breath, like a school-boy.

"That sounds genuine, at any rate!" she said, laughing. "But, please, Mr. Armstrong, don't stand staring at me like that. Since you began by being personal, I will follow suit and say what a lovely fur-lined coat you have! It is so gorgeous that you look quite like a duke!"

"Or an actor," he suggested, laughing. "Actors are very partial to fur-lined coats, and being clean shaved makes me look still more like one."

"You used to wear a moustache?" she said, more as a statement than a question.

"Yes; but it was such a bad one that I abolished it. The reason for this coat is that I thought it might be cold driving."

"Driving?" she repeated, in surprise.

"Yes. Don't you see my cart waiting? I've brought a warm fur rug for you; but I'm afraid you'll be cold about the shoulders. It's only a few minutes past two, however, and we shall be able to buy a cape or a boa or something in one of the shops in the High Street."

Stepping up to the groom, who was driving a handsome bay mare in the neatest of dog-carts, Wallace directed him to follow while he turned back with Laline in the direction of the shops.

"You must choose it yourself," he explained to Laline. "Something very warm in fur."

"What are you thinking of?" she exclaimed. "You cannot for one moment suppose that I would accept valuable presents from a stranger?"

She had stopped in her walk, and he stopped, too, and looked down for a moment into her face, his blue eyes shining with a soft light, the sight of which brought sudden blushes to her cheek.

"I had forgotten," he said. "There is something else we must buy first."

In an instant she knew what he meant. Had she not been through the same experience with him before, years ago? She could almost have laughed aloud as he hurried her into a jeweller's shop, and they stood together before the counter while Wallace asked again, as he had done in Boulogne, to be shown some engagement-rings, "to fit this lady's finger."

The man's half-smile was just the same as it had been years ago. Surely some faint recollection of that former scene would come back to Wallace now, as he stood by her side and gently drew off her glove, just as he had done before, to try the rings!

"Which one do you like best?" he asked; and, breaking into a hysterical laugh, Laline declared that she must have "a turquoise heart surrounded by small diamonds."

"The price will be one hundred francs," she said, and almost expected that Wallace would at once proceed to purchase, as before, the wedding-ring as well.

But he did not do so. He only looked rather surprised, and inquired of the jeweller whether he had a ring of the description given. The man answered in the negative; and Laline, blushing and confused, allowed a moonstone-and-diamond heart and lovers'-knot to be slipped on her finger, and declared herself to be perfectly satisfied with it. The price this time was twenty guineas

instead of one hundred francs; and, being now for the second time formally engaged to her husband, as she expressed it in her thoughts, Mrs. Wallace Armstrong left the shop with him.

She was still so overwhelmed by the way in which her little outburst had fallen flat that she behaved with great docility, and hardly uttered a protest as Wallace took her into a fashionable millinery establishment and purchased for her a deep sable collar, which he at once proceeded to fasten round her neck over her velvet cape.

"Now you will be safe from cold," he said, triumphantly. "As soon as my dear old uncle heard that to-day I was coming courting, he simply lined my pockets with bank-notes."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course I did! And he was in a state of the highest delight. 'Not the red-haired one, I hope—I didn't like her mouth,' was his only objection. When he heard that it was you I was in love with, it was all I could do to prevent him from coming with me to plead my cause."

"You seem to have been very confident," observes Laline, "and very sure of winning my consent."

"I knew I should get it sooner or later by dint of asking," he answered, as he helped her into the dog-cart and carefully wrapped a fur rug round her knees. "Ever since I saw the lamplight shine on your face that first evening at Mrs. Vandeleur's I knew that I should never have a moment's peace until I had made you my wife."

"You have never even asked me to marry you!" said Laline, her spirits rising under the strangeness of her surroundings. "You have only met me four times, and have talked a lot of sentiment and abstract love-making; then to-day, before I had time to think, you dragged me

into a jeweller's shop and bought me a ring. But you have never proposed to me, and I have never accepted you. Consequently we cannot be engaged."

"Lina Grahame," he said, bending his head to look in her face as he took his seat by her side, "will you be my wife?"

"Wallace Armstrong," she returned, in quick staccato utterance, "what has become of Laline Garth?"

CHAPTER XVI.

As soon as the words "Wallace Armstrong, what has become of Laline Garth?" had left her lips, Laline's heart sank within her. On Wallace's answer very much depended. And at first he did not answer, but only drew his level black brows near together and stared straight before him at his horse's head.

"I cannot imagine," he said at length, after a pause which seemed interminable to the girl by his side, "why you ask me that now. It is such a sad and painful subject, and I meant to-day to be so happy. What is the use of trying to revive a dead past?"

"Do you never think of it?" she asked.

"Never, if I can help it! I suppose you heard the whole affair from my uncle? Whether you blame me or not, I don't see that I could have acted otherwise."

"And you never think of her?"

"Never!" he answered, calmly. "Why should I? The poor child is long ago dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Surely my uncle told you that?"

"Yes—no—I don't remember. How do you know that she is dead?"

"I saw her grave. Why, how white you are, and how excited you seem! Why do you take such a strange interest in the girl?"

"I—I am sorry for her," faltered Laline.

She could not understand it. Was it some trick of her father's, she wondered—and did Wallace really believe her to be dead?

"What became of that Captain Garth who wrote the letter to your uncle?" she inquired, suddenly.

"Oh, that old sinner? He died of apoplexy two years ago, having enjoyed a handsome annuity from my soft-hearted uncle on the strength of the poor girl Laline having been his niece. But, dearest, if you knew how much I hate the subject, you would not, I am sure, compel me to discuss it."

"I will say no more about it now," she observed, quietly.

In spite of the quick drive through the keen air she was very pale. His news had strangely affected her, and the certainty that her father was dead moved her deeply. She tried to remember all that was good about him, and recalled on the instant many little acts of careless kindness which until then she had forgotten. All the Boulogne life came before her again in its sordid daily details, and she saw herself as Wallace had first seen her—an overgrown child in a short blue-cotton gown, with her long hair floating over her shoulders under her "Zulu" hat.

A barrier seemed suddenly to have arisen between her and Wallace. His belief that she was dead complicated things; and the fact that he clearly disliked all allusion to the events which occurred at Boulogne distressed Laline. Sooner or later she would have to enlighten him as to her identity; and might not this news go far to weaken his passion for her? Troubled with these

thoughts, she sat still and silent, with big tears gathering in her eyes, hearing without listening to Wallace's light-hearted talk about indifferent subjects.

"Lina," he suddenly exclaimed, "you have tears in your eyes! What is the matter, darling?"

"I don't know. A fit of the blues, I suppose."

"You want exercise and amusement, that's what it is," he said, decisively. "My plan for to-day will do you all the good in the world. That room of Mrs. Vandeleur's isn't good for you. The mental atmosphere is unnatural; you are growing to look ghostlike yourself in it!"

"I am quite well," she said, rousing herself from her reverie. "But where are we? I don't know much about London yet, and I am very near-sighted, and have been thinking of something else. But surely this is a part of the world I haven't been in before?"

"This is Baker Street, and we are on our way to Regent's Park and Hampstead. We shall stop at my uncle's Hampstead house, the Homestead, and have some skating in the grounds; then Mrs. Sylvester the housekeeper will give us tea, and I will drive you back home in good time this evening."

"But it's just like an elopement!" she protested.

"Well, you must blame my uncle for that, and not me. It is he who arranged the whole thing, and telegraphed to Mrs. Sylvester that we were coming. I always run over to the Homestead once or twice a week to see that the horses aren't eating their heads off. I intended driving over this afternoon if I had not been going out with you; and it was my uncle who declared that you must see the place and judge whether you would like to live in it."

"To live in it!" she repeated, in astonishment. "You and your uncle," she added, "seemed to have settled

everything between you in a very remarkable manner, without the preliminary formality of consulting me. Pray, when did you arrange these nice little plans together?"

"As soon as you had left the house last Wednesday. My uncle was already aware that I was in love with one of you two younger ladies, but did not know which, and he was overjoyed when he found it was you. You won his heart by listening to his long stories, even if he hadn't been charmed by your lovely face and voice."

"I always understood," Laline put in, demurely, "that you made your first visit to Mrs. Vandeleur's house in the character of Clare Cavan's admirer?"

"I did and do admire Miss Cavan very much," he answered, promptly. "I should like to paint her as Vivien charming Merlin, both of them in modern evening-dress, with Miss Cavan showing off her beautiful white neck and arms for a senile and rather Jewish-looking Merlin's edification. Miss Cavan represents a very attractive type, but not the type I should care to marry."

"You talk," she said, with a touch of impatience in her tone, "as though any girl would jump at the chance of marrying you!"

"I certainly don't mean to convey that impression," he retorted; "although I am sorry to say that many girls I meet would be delighted to marry Alexander Wallace's nephew, whatever he might be like—old, ugly, deformed, or hateful—just for the sake of Alexander Wallace's money!"

"And is it that belief," she asked, blushing hotly, "which made you so confident in my case?"

"Lina," he exclaimed, in reproachful tones, "why do you ask me such a question? It is neither fair to yourself nor to me."

"Well, I get annoyed when you show how sure you felt of winning me," she explained, apologetically.

"Of course," he said, flicking his horse's ears reflectively with his whip—"of course I knew that in time I should worry you into saying 'Yes.' But at first I own I was a good deal troubled by the strange look of repulsion and even a fear that came into your lovely eyes when you looked at me. You remember when, as I left the house after my first visit, I turned and looked back and caught you watching my departure from a window on the ground-floor?"

"I remember."

"Well, your look then was one of terror and dislike combined, which simply struck dismay into my soul. Tell me, Lina—why did you look at me like that?"

"You reminded me of some one whom I used to know and dislike four years and a half ago," she answered, faintly.

She half hoped that the date she gave would form a link in his mind; but her words evidently conveyed to him no hint of her intention, for he only laughed.

"Four years and a half ago you must have been such a very little girl that your prejudices were probably wholly unreasonable," he said, cheerfully. "How old are you now, Lina?"

"Twenty."

"As old as that? I thought you were fully two years younger. Well, Lina, there is just the right difference between us. What does Shakspeare say?—

'Let still the woman take
An elder than herself; so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband's heart.'

Our marriage will be ideal in every way."

"If I marry you."

"If! You won't be able to help yourself. How slowly this mare is going!"

"Slowly! We seem to me to be skimming over the ground!"

"Ah, but that's because you are not so anxious as I to get there!"

Laline glanced shyly up at him, and her heart began to suddenly beat quicker. She had never yet been made love to in her life, but she felt certain that Wallace was counting the moments until he could claim the kiss out of which Clare Cavan's sudden entrance had defrauded him on the preceding Wednesday. For the first time it became strongly borne in upon her mind that she was doing something altogether startling and unconventional in thus accompanying a young man, against whose character very serious accusations had been made, to his country-house without the necessary sacrifice to Mrs. Grundy provided by the presence of a chaperon. But, after all, was she not engaged to him, with his uncle's full sanction—and was he not by law her natural guardian and protector, being in very truth her husband?

Looking at him under the bright, clear light of a frosty winter sun, Laline could see in Wallace's face no signs at all of the vices and follies attributed to him. The study of his features, on the other hand, filled her with a secret delight and pride of possession which thrilled through her entire being. This was essentially a manly man, handsome, erect, full of life, strength, and vigour—a man whose mere outward appearance attracted long and admiring glances from women of all ranks as he drove along, and whose driving and perfectly neat and smart turn-out drew towards him looks of approbation from masculine equals and inferiors alike. And he was not only her husband, but in love with her—a man wealthy, popular, and much sought after, who had gone out of his

way to implore her, a little penniless dependant, to be his wife.

They were driving up a steep hill by this time, not far from Hampstead Heath.

"That is the Homestead," Wallace said, indicating with his whip the tall stacks of chimneys of a large white house peering from among trees near the summit of the hill.

Laline felt glad of both Wallace's and Mrs. Vandeleur's recent additions to her wardrobe as she drove in the dog-cart through the lodge-gates of the Homestead. Clearly the rumour that the young master was bringing down his future bride had spread abroad, for the lodge-keeper came out to pull his forelock and smile, with his wife curtsying and smiling behind him.

At the house—a big rambling erection, decked with ivy and creepers, and wearing an air of homelike comfort—Mrs. Sylvester, a plump, middle-aged, gray-haired woman, came out in an evident flutter of excitement and her best silk dress and cape to welcome the visitors.

Mrs. Sylvester wanted nothing better than for the young master to marry and instal himself at the Homestead, to impart a little liveliness to the establishment, and prevent it from being let to strangers, and she was delighted with the appearance of Mr. Armstrong's *fiancée*.

"Quite the lady!" she confided afterwards to the cook, in discussing Laline's appearance. "As handsome as you may wish to see, though p'raps a bit too thin for some people's tastes; but that only makes her more elegant. A sweet face, cook, and dressed in the height of fashion. That sable collarette she was wearing must have cost thirty or forty pounds; and her black velvet hat and cape were quite the latest fashion. For my part, I like a young lady with some style about her."

Big fires had been lit everywhere about the house in

accordance with old Mr. Wallace's orders, so that Laline might be favourably impressed with the place, and by her own request she was presently shown over the identical rooms prepared for her reception when she had been expected as a bride four years before. These rooms wore by this time a more or less faded and neglected air; but the affectionate forethought with which the whole suite had at first been planned touched Laline deeply as she wandered through the pretty sitting-room, furnished with books and piano, the daintily-appointed dressing-room and bath-room, and the cosy little study fitted with every trifle necessary to the mistress of a household.

After the inspection was over, Laline found Wallace waiting for her in the drawing-room at the back of the house, which led into the grounds through a spacious conservatory. A large fire was burning in the fireplace, and, as the door closed on Mrs. Sylvester, Wallace drew his betrothed towards the friendly blaze.

"You must get your hands warm before you go out again," he said. "You must have got cold sitting still in the cart."

Standing with her in front of the fire, he drew up her hands against his neck, and looked down into her eyes, his own alight with love.

"At last we are alone," he whispered. "Lina, do you love me?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"Then put your arms round my neck of your own accord and kiss me. See—I let them go. It must be of your own accord."

Her hands crept gently up until they were clasped behind his neck, and her soft lips fluttered lightly upon his for a second, until, with a sigh of content, he folded his arms about her, and kissed her again and again with all his soul in his lips.

“My darling—my Lina—my wife!”

It seemed to Laline that all her life through she had been waiting for this moment, and that no future happiness could equal this of the first kiss of love given and returned.

“To think that I have let you grow to twenty before I claimed you!” he exclaimed, while they stood together before the fire and he stroked her soft hair as she pillowed her cheek on his shoulder. “Ever since I first came to Mrs. Vandeleur’s, and you dropped that magic crystal at sight of me, I have dreamed of this moment. For though you seemed to be so strangely afraid of me in life, in my dreams you were always just as you are now, with my arms about you and your head on my shoulder; and I knew the moment would soon come when my dreams would come true. From the very first I knew that you belonged to me by right and must be mine some day.”

“That is only because you happened to take a fancy to me,” she protested, perversely. “Supposing that I had been married to some one else, where would your sentiments have been then?”

“Ah, but you couldn’t have looked as you did if you had been married to any one else, or if you had loved any one else! I know—I am certain that you never cared for any one before. But tell me so; I like to hear it.”

She laid her hands upon his shoulders and drew a little away from him, looking earnestly into his eyes.

“I solemnly swear,” she said, “that I have never in my life known what it was to love before, and that I love you with my whole heart! There—will that satisfy you?”

“And when will you be my wife?”

“Oh, not for a long time yet”

"Why not? Don't you wish to be always with me?" he demanded, jealously.

"Yes; but you hardly know me. We must be at least engaged long enough to make each other's acquaintance. I shall want to hear all your past life; you will want to hear all mine——"

"Your past life is written in your face, dear. All I want to read is there."

"But there are things which you must hear—things which may anger and surprise you, and even make you cease to love me."

He held her from him at arm's length while he scanned her face intently.

"There is only one thing I care to know," he said. "Has any man ever kissed your lips before?"

"Never!"

"There," he cried triumphantly, folding her in his arms again and covering her cheeks and lips and eyes with quick kisses—"that is all I want to know and all I will listen to! Come outside now and skate, or we shall deeply wound the feelings of the men who have been all the morning clearing the ice from show. Let me help you to put on your hat. If you look up at me under the brim like that I shall never let you get outside, but shall spend the entire afternoon kissing you! Your lips are as soft as a rose-leaf, and you have been allowed to grow to twenty without being forcibly carried off and married, whether you consented or not! Waiting for me, my dear, beautiful Lina? One last kiss before we leave the conservatory, and one more on that enchanting little pink ear, and one more still on the soft cream-coloured space behind your ear, where the gold-brown hair grows! Here we are at the conservatory door. A moment more, and I sha'n't be able to kiss you. Just stop long enough to tell me that you love me. No more

‘Mr. Armstrong;’ call me by my second name, as my uncle does—‘Lorin.’ My name is Wallace Lorin Armstrong. Now say that you love me and are glad to be my wife.”

Tears were in her eyes as she obeyed him—tears of intense happiness after long years of loneliness and separation.

“I love you, Lorin dear,” she murmured, in tender, trembling tones; “and I am glad with all my heart and soul to be your wife!”

CHAPTER XVII.

SKATING in the Homestead grounds was skating at its best.

A considerable expanse of water, forming a miniature lake, led out into a long winding canal, which took its course under tall over-arching trees and between steep banks, in summer decked with flowering reeds, forget-me-nots, and ferns.

Laline had not skated since she lived in the country with her mother as a little child; but Wallace Armstrong excelled in skating, as he did in all outdoor exercises, and once he had fitted to her feet one of several pairs of skates he had provided, and had affixed his own as well, the two started, he grasping both her hands in support and teaching her to bend and sway her supple figure as they moved over the ice together.

The keen air blew in their faces, the whirr of their skates and here and there the snapping of a twig under the weight of snow were the only sounds that came to them; across the western sky red bands of light showed where the sun was sinking to rest; while over a long

stretch of sparkling white snow they could see through the bare tree-branches the comfortable lights shine out of the windows of the house to beckon them to warmth and shelter.

But Laline and Wallace were on enchanted ground; they seemed no longer two persons, but moved by one and the same spirit as they sped hand in hand over the frozen lake. Faster and faster they flew, until they seemed to leave the beaten wind behind them and to glow with a warmth that was kindlier than sunshine. It was as though they could not tire; the magnetic effect of shoulder touching shoulder, hand clasped in hand, spurred them ever to fresh efforts. Not until six o'clock did Laline remember that she was tired. Then suddenly her ankle gave way; she slipped, and would have fallen had not Wallace caught her in his arms.

"I am tired," she said, clasping both hands round his arm as she smiled up in his face. "I never thought of it until this minute, because it was so perfectly beautiful. But I am really very tired."

He reproached himself strenuously for having allowed her to do too much, and, tenderly assisting her to a seat, removed her skates and led her to the house. In the drawing-room a lamp was burning under a shade of crimson silk, throwing a ruddy glow over the room, and the leaping firelight shone on the tea-things spread on a small table near its cheerful blaze.

"You must want dinner now, my poor, dear child!" exclaimed Wallace, ruefully. "We ought to have had tea an hour and a half ago, only we forgot all about it."

"Tea is just exactly what I want," she declared—"tea by the fire! And then I must be rushing back as fast as I can go. What will Mrs. Vandeleur say?"

"I will see her to-night, if you like."

"Not for the world!"

Into Laline's face a troubled look crept. There was still so much to be told. Mrs. Vandeleur had yet to learn that Wallace was her husband; and Wallace had yet to be told that he was at length in love with his own wife. She was so happy at this moment that instinct warned her against the risk of explanations. Wallace saw the cloud on her face, and was by her side in a moment.

"What is the matter, my darling?"

"Nothing," she said, turning to him suddenly with tears glistening in her eyes—"except the fear that some day you may learn things, hear things, which will make you love me less."

"There is no possibility with me of loving you less, dear," he said, "for I love you absolutely. Until I met you I merely drifted through life; art, business, society, athletics, each took a certain portion of my time, but I wanted an anchorage. I was frittering my time away waiting for you. Do you know what that wonderful little old lady of yours told me when she first saw me? She said—I remember her actual words—'You are capable of going to the greatest lengths of what people would call folly for the sake of one you love. You like many people, you love very few. But where you love it is a passion, a religion!'"

"Did she tell you anything else?" asked Laline, deeply interested.

"Yes. She predicted that I was on the eve of a new experience which would alter the whole course of my life. Why, Lina, that was loving you!"

"Yes; but did she make no prediction? I know one ought not to be so superstitious as to believe those things, but she makes such strangely true guesses sometimes. Did she say your love would make you happy?"

He hesitated.

"Of course Mrs. Vandeleur doesn't know everything,"

he said at last, half laughing. "She is merely a remarkably close observer, and a good judge of character from the face and hand."

"But what did she say?" persisted Laline.

"She said," he answered, throwing his arm about her waist and drawing her closely to him, as though defying Fate to separate them, "that my love-affair would bring me a great deal of trouble, and that there would be sorrow and partings and evil wrought me by an enemy, until death should set me free."

Almost unconsciously, as he quoted the little sibyl's words, his tone changed from banter to deep seriousness; and to Laline there was something ominous and terrifying in Mrs. Vandeleur's prophecy.

"I can't bear to hear you repeat her words," she whispered, clinging to him as she spoke, "for to me also she prophesied that trouble—terrible trouble—would come into my life if once I let love enter my heart."

"And yet what trouble can come between you and me?" he asked, smoothing her brow with his hand as she rested her head against his shoulder. "Who can part us? No one, so far as I know, has either the power or the will to do so. My uncle is almost as anxious for my marriage as I am—and, if I had my way, it should take place to-morrow. Mrs. Vandeleur will offer no objection, I imagine, and, even if she did, she has no authority over you. Your health is good——"

"I never remember a day's real illness in my life."

"Nor do I. And here is your house ready for you. As to money to buy frocks and things—you have only to mention a sum and my uncle will send it to you by return of post. Nothing can part us now!"

"Don't, don't!" she exclaimed, laying her fingers on his lips—"it sounds like a challenge to Fate!"

He laughed as he kissed her finger-tips.

"That ghost-ridden panelled room of Mrs. Vandeleur's has held you too long," he said. "You are growing as superstitious as an old villager. And, my darling, there are actually tears rolling down your cheeks! Now let me dry them, and then you must bathe your eyes and take off your hat and cloak, and we will sit down facing each other at the tea-table and play at being a newly-married clerk on a hundred a year bringing home his bride!"

Half laughing, but with moist eyes, she obeyed him, and in a very few minutes they were sitting down to an old-fashioned country tea of hot cakes, hot buttered toast, and eggs served in various ways. To each it seemed the most absolutely satisfactory meal ever placed before them; but then they were very much in love, and they were together.

The one predominating idea in Wallace's mind was the wedding-day; and upon whatever subject Laline began to talk he invariably brought it round to the date he wanted her to fix.

"You have just said you are so fond of sunshine and that you don't like cold and fogs," he said. "Well, then, why put up with any more of them? We will be married at once, and set sail for Algiers or Cairo or the Canary Islands, or just where you please where there is sunshine and warmth and a blue sky above us. Why should you be shivering in St. Mary's Crescent, and I be freezing at a desk in the Strand, when we might be enjoying ourselves on sunny seas together? Are you fond of the sea?"

"Very, very fond. I was never so happy when I lived in Boulogne as when I could wander alone for miles along the sands, watching the waves. And I am a capital sailor too."

"So you have lived at Boulogne?" he remarked, in

some surprise. "I had a short and very unpleasant experience of the place rather more than four years ago—a time I much dislike recalling. But, if you love the sea, we have endless delight to look forward to, for I am never happier than when on board ship. So that brings me back to the day, Lina dear; and if you really loved me you wouldn't put me off and keep me waiting."

"I have never bought a *trousseau*!" she demurred. "You must let me consult Mrs. Vandeleur as to just what time I shall want to get my things together."

"I think it is the most preposterous convention in the world," he protested, energetically, "that two people who love each other should be kept apart over a silly matter of millinery! As though I should value you more highly with a dozen hats than with one, or think you more beautiful in any gown than you look at this minute! In Shakspeare's time girls knew what love meant. Juliet didn't worry Romeo to wait while she ordered and tried on frills and furbelows, but went straight to the point—

'If that thy bent of love be honourable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word to-morrow,
By one that I'll procure to come to thee,
Where, and what time, thou wilt perform the rite;
And all my fortunes at thy feet I'll lay,
And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world!'"

"Juliet was only fourteen, and didn't know the value of dress," Laline retorted, laughing.

"If we have a special license," he remarked, ignoring her protest, "we need not have that tiresome fortnight of delay."

"When I do marry you," she said, quickly, "it must be in a church. Marriage in a registry office means nothing to me and seems only an impious mockery."

"Of course we'll be married in a church!" he returned,

in some surprise. "St. Mary-le-Strand or Kensington Church, whichever you prefer. And, now that we have come to the place, dear, it is as well to fix the day."

It was only after long persuasion that Laline at last agreed that the ceremony should take place in February, a month that had just begun. It seemed as though she were afraid of hurrying on the wedding lest those misfortunes at which Mrs. Vandeleur had hinted should follow close upon her decision. She was intensely anxious, for the same reason, to defer, for the next few days, at least, any public announcement of her forthcoming marriage.

"Everybody will say I am marrying you for your money," she explained, "and I sha'n't like to hear it."

"What in the world does it matter to us what they may say?" he inquired. "They will scarcely tell you so to your face; and, if such things are going to be said, they will be uttered just the same if we marry next week or next year. If you loved me a hundredth part as much as I love you, you wouldn't want to defer our marriage by an hour."

"We are so perfectly happy as we are!" she was pleading, when he interrupted her.

"Perfectly happy! When I have to leave you and exist through hours before I see you again I am not happy. Of course I will call to-morrow at St. Mary's Crescent——"

"Not to-morrow. Monday."

"Lina, you are proving every moment more clearly how little you care!"

"Lorin, dear, I do care! But I must have breathing time."

This conversation took place in the brougham, in which Laline was being driven back to Kensington, as Wallace feared lest she might catch cold in the dog-cart.

In the brougham, too, he could sit beside her with his arms wrapped round her, which was an ideal method of travelling and to the taste of both. To Wallace it seemed as though immense capabilities for passion and tenderness, which for years had been closed up within his heart, overflowed now for the first time. He could not lavish enough caresses upon her, could not call her by enough tender names; and the contrast between his present extreme demonstrativeness and the easy courteous self-possession of his habitual manner might well have startled Laline, but that the change in her own bearing was, if possible, even more marked.

Very early deprived of a mother's love, and placed in a position entailing a measure of responsibility, Laline had received little or no marks of affection from man or woman since her early childhood. "*La p'tite Gart*" had cooked her father's dinners, run on her father's errands, and taken care of the neighbours' children; and, later, Miss Lina Grahame, assistant mistress at Mrs. Melville's select Academy for Young Ladies, had been looked up to as a paragon of austere propriety, engaged from seven in the morning until nine at night in instilling English, French, needlework, and manners to her employer's pupils.

In all this life of routine there had been no love at all. For seven years the girl's whole nature, originally confiding and affectionate, had been repressed and thrown back on itself. Knowing that she was really married, she had set herself the task of crushing out of her heart every trace of tender feeling for any person of the opposite sex. She had not dared to love, and had planned for herself a future of incessant work and activity, into which no thoughts of love might ever enter. The shock of overhearing her father and husband haggling over the money bargain by which she was transferred from

the one to the other had been great and even terrible ; but fortunately Laline's nature was too sweet to be permanently embittered against all men by those unhappy early experiences. Still the result of these latter had been to make her both self-reliant and reserved, and to induce her to regard herself as a person set apart, for whom the happiness of loving and being loved could never exist, doomed by man's selfishness to a life of loveless solitude.

Matters being thus with her, the affection with which, almost from the moment of his entrance into Mrs. Vandeleur's house, Wallace had inspired her, came like the warmest sunshine into Laline's heart, melting the icy reserve in which it perforce was wrapped. She had never really tried to resist the feelings of interest and tenderness with which he had inspired her. He was her husband—it was right that she should love him ; and neither her remembrance of his selfish treachery towards her years ago, nor the vague rumours of drunkenness and dissipation which she had heard against him recently, sufficed to diminish her growing regard. Duty and inclination went hand in hand, and she knew now that she had loved him as they wandered together under the snow-covered trees in Kensington Gardens, had loved him as they stood together in the South Sea room at his uncle's house, and that she loved him now, passionately and without reserve, receiving and returning his kisses with a warmth and tenderness which satisfied even a lover's exacting spirit, and nestling against him with a gentle confidence which touched and delighted him beyond the power of words to express.

It was nearly ten o'clock when the carriage arrived in the old-fashioned red-brick Crescent and clattered over the stone-paved court until it drew up before Mrs. Vandeleur's door. A light burned in the front room on the

ground-floor, and Clare Cavan's face was clearly to be seen, pressed against the window and peeping out at them.

"Don't kiss me, Lorin — some one is watching!" whispered Laline; but her warning was thrown away.

"I am proud of my right to kiss you, darling, and I don't care who sees me!" he whispered back, as, raising his hat, he pressed his lips to hers.

The next moment the door was opened by Susan, and Laline ran into the house.

In the front room Clare bit her thin red lips until the blood started; she was too genuinely angry even to go after Laline.

"Cat!" she whispered to herself. "Sly cat, with her Puritan airs! But I'll make her suffer for cutting me out and making me look ridiculous! And Aunt Cecilia, too, laughing at me absolutely, and telling me I'd better leave off trying to attract with Lina about! I can at least make her thoroughly miserable and uncomfortable to-morrow morning. But as soon as he comes he will set it right. Never mind; he shall have a bad time of it to-morrow, too, and shall be made to feel disgraced and ashamed before Lina and Aunt Cecilia and me if I can manage it. It's most unlucky that to-morrow's Sunday!"

A sudden inspiration came at that moment to Miss Cavan; her odd green eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she quickly seated herself before a desk and proceeded to write, in a round disguised hand, a letter addressed to "Wallace Armstrong, Esq.," and signed "A Well-Wisher."

She laughed as she read it; and, still laughing, ran lightly to her room, put on her hat and cloak, slipped the letter into her pocket, and, venturing boldly out into the snowy night, chartered a hansom and directed the

man to drive to a certain address, in order that with her own hands she might place her precious missive in the letter-box.

CHAPTER XVIII.

To Laline's great relief, no one spoke to her or interfered with her in any way on her return; and she was able to retire with her ecstatic thoughts to her own room.

To say that she had never been so happy in her life would be to understate the case. Until this day she had not known what happiness was. Sleep was out of the question for a long time; Laline was too happy to sleep. She laid her flushed cheek upon her pillow, and proceeded slowly and lingeringly to recall every word, every look, and every caress she had received from Wallace Armstrong.

Her vivid imagination being excited to its utmost, she thrilled again at her lover's touch, saw again the love-light in his eyes, turned her face to meet his kisses, and murmured into her pillow answering vows of unalterable love.

No scruples restrained her from giving herself up heart and soul to thoughts of him. He was her husband, and she had a right to love him, to glow with delight at the memory of his caresses, and to long ardently for the moment when she should see him again. In a very few days she would be doubly married to him—for Laline was resolved that the blessing of the Church should cement that hurried and unimpressive civil ceremony at Boulogne.

It occurred to her more than once that Wallace, in

his impatience to claim her as his wife, might wish, when once he learned her identity, to dispense with the delay of a second wedding; and for this reason alone she debated whether it might not be better to defer telling him the truth until after the ceremony had been performed.

Yet again she told herself that before the altar she must speak the truth. Laline Armstrong and not Lina Grahame was her name, and as Laline Armstrong she must be married—Laline Armstrong, neither spinster, widow, nor wife. The definitions confused her, and she laughed aloud in the dark from sheer light-heartedness to think that a man should be unknowingly wooing and wedding his own wife.

She would never feel that she was really his wife until they had been married in a church. So utterly different was the man she now knew and loved from the reckless, defiant, capriciously kind Wallace Armstrong of the old Boulogne days, that it seemed as though another soul had entered into the man, and that another ceremony was necessary to make him truly her husband.

The marked dislike, amounting almost to abhorrence, with which he alluded to his past experiences was characteristic of his complete reformation; but it was just this quality which made Laline dread breaking the truth to him. At least for a few days she decided that she must still be Lina Grahame. Their relations were so perfect that the introduction of any new element might mar their complete harmony; and having once arrived at this determination, Laline let her brain slip back again to the congenial employment of living again through every incident of her second courtship until at length her waking dreams of passionate delight were merged in sleep.

At this precise moment all happiness fled. No sooner was she asleep than terrible dreams afflicted her soul—dreams in which she was always endeavouring to reach her lover until some terrible catastrophe occurred to prevent their union, and she was hurled away into space with the sound of a man's mocking laughter in her ears.

Sometimes she thought she was wandering in a flower-bedecked meadow under a cloudless sky while numberless birds sang sweetly overhead. At a little distance she perceived Wallace approaching her, with gladness in his eyes and arms outstretched to embrace her. Through all her joy at sight of him a sense of foreboding hung over her which was too soon justified; for as, advancing rapidly to her side, he had almost seized her hands in his, the solid earth cleft open beneath their feet and they were irrevocably parted.

"You are mine—mine!" another voice seemed to mutter in her ear. Invisible hands imprisoned her, holding her back whenever she strove through the long hours of hideous dreaming to reach her lover; and, when at length the morning dawned and she awoke, it was with a terrible sense of impending trouble weighing upon her mind.

Just such a night of horrors had she experienced on a previous occasion not many days before. The night preceding Wallace Armstrong's appearance at Mrs. Vandeleur's house had been marked by exactly similar dreams; and Laline, as she dressed and contemplated her pale face and startled eyes in the looking-glass, tried to reassure herself by recalling that no untoward event had followed her dreams on the former occasion.

"They say dreams are always fulfilled in just the reverse way," she told herself. "Meeting my husband again was the happiest thing that ever happened to me;

so why should not last night's horrible fancies, which were exactly similar in character, portend some unexpected blessing? Oh, I am growing too sillily superstitious! Wallace is quite right; this house isn't good for me. But I shall leave it soon; and this month my husband's home will be mine. Nothing can part us now—nothing!”

In spite of her assumed brave front, Laline could not get rid of the unpleasant impression produced by her night fancies; and when she joined Clare Cavan at the breakfast-table, that young lady commented at once upon her altered appearance.

“My dearest Lina, you look so pale and so upset! What is it? Did you overtire yourself yesterday? You were out with some friends from your old school, were you not?”

Looking up suddenly, Laline perceived the lurking malice in the speaker's eyes and boldly took up the challenge Clare had thrown down.

“I was with Mr. Armstrong,” she answered, in clear, firm tones, “skating in the grounds of his uncle's house at Hampstead.”

“With Mr. Wallace Armstrong?” Clare inquired, in tones of assumed surprise and anxiety.

“Yes. I thought I saw you at the window watching us drive up to the house,” Laline observed, calmly.

“Well, I certainly thought it was you and he,” the ingenuous Clare returned, “but in the dark I couldn't be sure. I am so sorry!”

“Why should you be sorry?”

“Well, I hardly like to tell you; and yet perhaps I ought to. Of course you know that Mr. Armstrong admired me very much and paid me a great deal of attention? Well, I liked him too, as you know; but certain facts about him came into my possession yesterday which

made me resolve to ask Aunt Cecilia to drop him for the future."

"What are those facts?"

"It's a most shocking affair, dear, and I am afraid will distress you. I was dreadfully grieved about it; for you know I thought Mr. Armstrong so nice at first. It appears that old Mr. Farquharson the clerk was right, and that, though Mr. Armstrong appears so pleasant and well-bred and charming, he indulges periodically in fits of heavy drinking, during which he is really like a wild beast and not responsible for his actions."

"Who told you all this?"

"Mrs. Fitzroy Cleaver was talking about it yesterday. She had to forbid him her house because he got frightfully tipsy and tried to make love to the servants. That happened last year; but he is never to be trusted, she declared, and may break out at any moment."

"I simply don't believe it!"

"Will you believe your eyes?" asked Clare, lowering her white lids to hide the triumph in her gaze. "Read this; it is from the *Daily Leader* of last June."

As she spoke, she took from her purse and laid in front of Laline's plate a cutting from a newspaper, headed—"Disgraceful Conduct of a Gentleman."

Laline's heart beat with a sickening apprehension. Not wishing Clare to see her emotion, she rose from the table and took the cutting to the window, where, with cheeks crimson with mortification, she read that Wallace Armstrong, "stated to be nephew to the well-known banker Alexander Wallace," had been brought before the magistrate on a charge of drunkenness and brutal assault on the police. The accused, it was stated, made no answer to the charge; and, it being proved that on three previous occasions fines had been inflicted for similar offences and instantly paid, the magistrate decided

to mark his sense of the man's disgraceful conduct by sending him to prison with hard labour for six months.

"Of course they got him off again," Clare volunteered, as Laline returned the paper to her without speaking, "and it was kept out of most of the papers. I am so dreadfully sorry for that poor dear old Mr. Wallace! That sort of drunkenness is nothing else but insanity; and I suppose one ought to be sorry for Mr. Armstrong as well. As soon as I heard the dreadful story it explained so many things I couldn't understand during our visit the other day. That person shut up near the studio, for instance, was no doubt Mr. Armstrong's keeper, close at hand to look after him in case he should have one of his attacks."

"You pretended that it was a woman who sprang out upon you."

"Did I say so? Of course in the dark I couldn't see. In any case, I am very, very sorry for the whole business; and I do hope, dear Lina, that you won't take it too much to heart. Remember, Mr. Armstrong is only a very slight and recent acquaintance; it isn't as if he were an old friend. Don't worry yourself about him, dear."

"I don't want your sympathy and I don't want your advice; I don't believe in either of them!" flamed out poor Laline. "I believe that these are all lies and that Mr. Armstrong will be easily able to disprove them. And as to being a mere acquaintance—I love him, and I am going to marry him!"

With that, Laline swept from the room, desperately unhappy, but determined in spite of all appearances to be loyal to the man she loved.

She tried not to think about him in church, tried to appear at luncheon as though nothing had ruffled her usual serenity. But Clare's exaggerated consideration

and obvious sympathy were well-nigh intolerable. Laline could neither eat nor talk, and could hardly keep back from her eyes tears of shame and vexation at the turn things had taken since the morning.

Wallace, her chivalrous, tender, manly lover, a drunkard and an insensate brute! The thought seemed sacrilege. And yet Laline remembered she had somewhere heard that dipsomaniacs were often, but for that one hideous vice, among the most refined and sweet-natured of men. Of one thing she was the more resolved every hour—she would see her husband at once, tax him with what she had learned, and if possible elicit from him the entire truth. If only her influence might avail to wean him from this degrading vice she would not for one moment hesitate, but would dedicate her life to the task of reclaiming him.

With these conflicting reflections agitating her mind, she could hardly pretend to pay any attention to Clare's easy and incessant flow of chatter during the course of the meal any more than she could attune her mind to Mrs. Vandeleur's fantastic talk in her study in the afternoon. The little lady shook her head sadly as she looked at her secretary.

"Already spoiled! Already spoiled!" she murmured. "Lina, have you nothing to say to me?"

"I shall have ever so much that I want to say to you by this time to-morrow!" Laline cried, springing from her chair and beginning to move restlessly about the room. "But you must let me see Mr. Armstrong once more first, dear Mrs. Vandeleur. After that, I promise I will tell you the entire truth."

The little sibyl looked at her long and intently through her jewelled eye-glasses.

"You are very much in love," she observed, in her light silvery voice, and forthwith sighed. "It is a great

pity, when we were getting on so well together," she added, regretfully. "I wish," said Laline, wistfully, "that you could tell me whether it will all turn out happily. What does it mean, Mrs. Vandeleur, when one dares not look ahead, when one watches the hands of the clock in dread of what the next hour will bring forth? And all for no reason or for insufficient reason. It is true that to-day I have heard something that troubles me greatly. But I was not wholly unprepared to face it, and this dreadful foreboding seems to presage something even worse, some terrible misfortune for which I am wholly unprepared."

She stood before Mrs. Vandeleur in her trailing white draperies, with scarcely more colour in her face than in her gown. Even her lips were pale, as, with low trembling accents, she gave voice to her fears.

"I have told you that love would bring trouble into your life," said Mrs. Vandeleur, "but of course I did not expect you to pay any attention to my words. To a limited extent, you have yourself the gift of second sight. I am going out now to pay a long-promised call on Lady Wray. While I am away take this crystal; concentrate your gaze immovably upon it, and let your heart guide your thoughts. It is possible that you may be able to learn as much about your future as I can tell you."

With that, she gently pushed Laline into a seat, and, placing in her hand the crystal ball, passed her fingers lightly and rapidly over the girl's brow, softly murmuring some undistinguishable words the while.

A feeling of drowsiness crept over Laline. Her eyelids closed, and for a few seconds she was lost to her surroundings. When she again opened her eyes she was alone, sitting by the fire, the light from which danced on the gleaming tiles and tall brass "dogs" within the fen-

der. The afternoon was one of black frost and gray fog, and although it was not yet four o'clock the dull, red sun gave but little illumination. St. Mary's Crescent was intensely quiet, but the boards and panelling of Mrs. Vandeleur's study emitted fitful creakings in the highest degree calculated to startle a nervous person.

Laline, as a rule, did not like to be alone there in the twilight, but this afternoon she was so much absorbed in her thoughts that she was almost indifferent to outer influences. She was intensely anxious to see Wallace and deeply regretted her own parting mandate to the effect that he must defer his visit until the following day. It was terrible to live in suspense, dreading and doubting lest he should not be able to clear himself from the abominable charges made against him. And yet, in the face of that newspaper cutting, what could he say? Already the ecstatic happiness which had filled her heart on the preceding evening had been dispelled; in spite of everything, she persisted in loving Wallace as dearly as ever, but her tranquil joy in loving him was a thing of the past.

As she leaned over the fire, lost in thought and rendered dreamier than was her wont by Mrs. Vandeleur's parting touches, Laline had entirely forgotten the crystal which the latter had placed in her hand, and it was only the sparkle of the glass as it caught the fire-light which attracted her attention to it again. She held it from her and gazed into its glistening depths; the dancing flames, the ruddy logs, the cloudy night sky flecked with stars painted on the ceiling, the dark oak panelling of the walls, and the faded tints and gruesome figures in the "Dance of Death" tapestry which ran as a frieze round the room, were all mirrored there in miniature, seen imperfectly by the aid of her near-sighted vision. Gradually, as she bent nearer, fascinated

by the prettiness of the reflections, her own face came within focus, unusually intent and pale, with eyes fixed and distended. Once before, on the afternoon of Wallace's first visit, she had held the crystal in her hands, and on that occasion, as she recalled now, she had seemed to see imaged the figure of her husband.

Would the same thing happen now? she wondered, as, with straining eyes, she stared into the crystal.

Presently the glass became clouded, the various objects about the room were no longer there, and in their stead Laline caught a gleam of green shutters, opened to flood with sunshine a small uncarpeted room on the floor of which a bright-haired girl was playing with a kitten. Laline held her breath. She knew before it happened that the door would open and a red-faced man with a heavy white moustache would enter, bringing another man after him.

"A gentleman to see us, Laline!"

She could almost hear the words, but, as the door opened and the girl sprang to her feet to greet the visitor, the figures in the crystal began to fade, and of the tall massive form following close on that of Captain Garth Laline caught barely more than a glimpse.

Only a glimpse, yet it drove the blood from her cheeks and lips and made her catch her breath as one half suffocated. With all the will-power she possessed she strove to gaze again into the past. At first her efforts were in vain, but after a few seconds of quivering apprehension the crystal depths became cleared again. She could see waves rippling in the sunlight and up the shiny green supports of a pier, upon which two figures were seated side by side—a man and a girl.

Every detail was correct. Laline remembered the pink cotton frock, made with her own fingers, and the black lace hat and Suède gloves, Wallace's gifts, which

she had worn so proudly. The man's head was lowered over the girl, whose left hand he held in his. But although Laline could not see his face she experienced a thrill of repulsion and terror at sight of his figure and thick curly black hair which showed under his straw hat.

Once again her memory brought back words from the past to complete the picture, and a man's voice, at sound of which her heart stood still with fear, slowly and impressively pronounced these words—

“This man will love you, and you will not be able to escape from him. His line of fate and yours run side by side and nothing but death can separate them!”

On the words the glass became clouded, the figures grew fainter and fainter until they vanished altogether, and Laline sat, trembling in every limb, with a new dread in her soul.

“It is the future and not the past which I must see,” she told herself. “If I could only get sight of something to guide me!”

From the depths of the crystal the face of a man seemed to resolve itself, and brilliant bluish-gray eyes under heavy black eyebrows to fix themselves upon her. A faint cry rose to Laline's lips. She did not wish to see what the glass held; she would not believe her eyes. Every moment the face became clearer while her sentiment of loathing and detestation increased in proportion.

Moved out of herself by overmastering excitement, she would have flung the crystal from her; but at that exact moment the silence in the room was suddenly broken by the opening of the door and Susan's voice announcing—

“Mr. Wallace Armstrong!”

CHAPTER XIX.

TREMBLING like a leaf in the wind, unnerved and weeping, Laline started from her seat, and as the door closed on the servant held out her arms towards her lover.

"You have come at last!" she sobbed out. "Oh, if you had stayed away another moment, I think I should have gone mad!"

He hesitated for a moment and then advanced into the room. As he did so she made a step towards him; but her limbs trembled so much that she faltered and would have fallen had he not drawn her into his arms.

For an instant she clung to him, sobbing hysterically, while he held her close against his breast smoothing her hair with one hand. Then over her from head to foot passed a quiver of the same strong repulsion and dread she had experienced a few seconds earlier. For a few seconds she remained absolutely motionless while her very blood seemed to turn cold drop by drop. Then, disengaging herself suddenly, she fell back from him and stared through the obscurity at his face.

"Wallace," she cried—"it is not Wallace Armstrong!"

"That is my name, at your service, all the same."

She did not faint or scream. She stood perfectly still before him while her heart seemed to turn to stone. She did not attempt to deceive herself. No mistake was possible now. All the old happy delusion was destroyed for ever by this man's touch, by this man's voice.

For, although she could not clearly see his face, although he had only spoken a few words, the voice was the same as that which had uttered the prophecy on Boulogne pier four years ago.

And at the sound of that voice all hope of love, all thought of happiness died out of Laline's heart. Her dream was over. Not the man she loved but this man whom she hated was her husband.

The whole truth poured in upon her brain as a sudden shaft of light in those terrible moments of silence. Five words told the story. There were two Wallace Armstrongs, and she had chosen to persuade herself that the one she loved was her husband. This man who stood before her now, with mocking laughter in his voice, an echo of which had haunted her dreams—this man, whose very clothing exhaled a nauseous perfume of spirits and whose accents were husky with drink, was the husband to whom she had pledged herself until death should part them on that fatal summer morning.

There was much to be explained, much that she could not understand; but of this one awful fact she was convinced and needed no further testimony. He had come into her life again, and already his sinister shadow had darkened all its sunshine.

So she stood before him in the twilit room and lived a lifetime of despairing grief before he spoke again.

"I am really exceedingly sorry to disappoint you," he said. "I suppose you expected my cousin? Your servant made a similar mistake at first. From your greeting I presume that I may congratulate him?"

"Yes, you presume," she said, and, passing him swiftly, she gained the door.

"One moment, please," he interposed, before she had time to leave the room. "I don't think there is any mistake on my part. I have come here on an introduction to Mrs. Sibyl Vandeleur, the celebrated sorceress or thought-reader or pin-finder—I don't quite know how she styles herself. I was not aware, until I arrived at

the house, of the—well, the very intimate terms upon which my cousin was received here.”

He paused, as though he expected her to speak. At every word he uttered in those leisurely sneering tones which she ought never to have forgotten Laline hated him a little more. She wondered now how she could ever have believed that such a man as this could grow gentle and chivalrous, unselfish and kind. Bitter and contemptuous in manner he had always been, but there was about him now an added recklessness—outcome of a savage scorn against himself and all the world. In manner he was the antithesis of his cousin, and yet every now and then Laline caught in his voice some inflection which reminded her of the man she loved. Even by this light she realised that in figure he was a little taller and of much heavier build than his namesake, and already inclining to the unhealthy stoutness which comes of lazy and dissipated habits.

It was strange that this time she felt but little of the fear of recognition she had before experienced when she believed herself in the presence of her husband. This man and she seemed in spirit so many leagues asunder, and there was so strong a barrier of gross material instincts between his mind and hers, that Laline intuitively knew he would not remember her. One woman would be the same as another to him; he would be incapable of differentiating between them. Moreover, any other thought she might entertain about him was swallowed up in the overpowering sensation of physical dislike with which he inspired her. In this dislike fear had a part, but it was the shrinking horror of a delicate and refined nature when confronted by one essentially coarse and brutal, and not a personal fear lest he should know and claim her as his wife which moved Laline.

The man was sunk enough, but not so sunk that he failed to recognise, even in the twilight of Mrs. Vandeleur's room, how this slenderly-made, sweet-voiced girl, who had clung so tenderly to him when she mistook him for his cousin, shrank from him, once her error was made known to her, in aversion none the less plain that it was not expressed in words. Wallace Armstrong the elder was a very handsome man, and had won some cheap reputation as a "lady-killer;" consequently this girl's antagonistic attitude piqued and angered him.

"Can I wait here for Mrs. Vandeleur?" he inquired, with mock politeness. "Or can I wait somewhere else—because, if you expect my cousin, I fear I shall be rather in the way?"

"Mrs. Vandeleur is out. She expects no visitors to-day, and I do not know when she will return."

"But you expect my cousin? I am sure he will be delighted to see me if you will allow me to wait until he arrives."

"If Mr. Wallace Armstrong is your cousin," Laline said, frigidly, with her hand on the door, "he has certainly never mentioned you. Under the circumstances, perhaps it would be better if you communicated your business to Mrs. Vandeleur by letter. She only receives strangers by appointment."

She was desperately anxious to get rid of this man, to stir his pride so that he should leave at once and never gain a footing within the house. His presence tortured her, and she longed to escape to her room that she might consider the new and horrible situation in which she found herself. But before the unwelcome visitor could do more than make one step towards the door, it was suddenly flying open, and Clare Cavan, in walking-dress, hurried in, and held out her hand cordially towards him.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Armstrong! So good of you to come on such a horrid foggy day! Why—have I made a mistake? Susan said it was Mr. Armstrong——”

“And it is Mr. Armstrong. Unfortunately my cousin and I were given precisely the same name by our respective mothers, both of whom were sisters to Alexander Wallace the banker, and anxious to propitiate him by making us his godsons. Two sisters married two brothers, you see. I was the unlucky result in the one case, and my Admirable Crichton of a cousin was the satisfactory result in the other. I come with an introduction to Mrs. Vandeleur; but it seems I am rather *de trop*——”

“Pray don’t say so. I am sure we are delighted to see you!” exclaimed Clare, effusively. “I am Mrs. Vandeleur’s niece, and my name is Cavan. Any friend or relation of Mr. Armstrong’s is extremely welcome here. Isn’t that so, Lina dear?”

Laline did not respond. A combination between Clare and this man suggested all manner of vague dangers. She longed to quit the room, and yet feared to leave them alone together lest they should discuss her and make she knew not what discovery thereby. Meanwhile Clare was flitting about, ringing the bell for the lamp and chattering gaily to her aunt’s visitor, apparently bent upon putting him at his ease.

“Detestable weather to-day, isn’t it, Mr. Armstrong? This fog is so fearfully depressing! And I have been calling on a family, half of whom were down with the influenza and the other half deadly afraid of catching it. London on a foggy Sunday afternoon is a most ghastly place, isn’t it? I like church, but I do hate church bells! In the country—across meadows and all that sort of thing—they sound musical and soothing; but in town they are most funereal and out of tune with other

sounds, and always suggest that one will be late, and that one's glove-buttons will come off at the last minute, and one will walk into church after the service has begun all red and perspiring and plain! And that's an awful ordeal!"

The lamp was brought in during the foregoing speech, and by its light, toned down by the amber silk-shade which veiled it, Wallace Armstrong the elder gazed curiously at the two other occupants of the room. Laline had resumed her usual low seat by the fire, but it was not to her that his glance was at first directed. Clare Cavan stood immediately before him, and his bold eyes ran approvingly over the voluptuous curves of her figure, the dead whiteness of her skin, and the red and yellow lights in her untidy coil of hair. Her white eyelids and pale lashes were lowered to all appearance modestly under his scrutiny, but out of the corners of her eyes she too was taking stock of him.

What she saw was by no means wholly pleasing. Even by the subdued light of the lamp and fire it was easy to read in this man's appearance the deterioration of his moral and physical nature. Originally handsomer than his cousin, he had at thirty years of age acquired the look of a man ten years older. His plentiful curly hair, which fell heavily over his forehead, was already streaked with gray. His cheeks were haggard and pale, contrasting with the puffiness of the skin under his eyes and about his chin and jaw, and his eyes, beautiful in shape and colour, were bloodshot and red in the lids. There was undoubtedly a strong family likeness between himself and his cousin; both men were tall, broad-shouldered, and well made, black-haired, blue-eyed, and of regular features, but there all resemblance ceased. Wallace Armstrong the elder was clearly on the downward road. His voice and manner had become coarse and

rough, and the bitterness of his nature showed itself in almost every word he uttered. Especially in his allusions to his cousin did this sneering tone assert itself; and as if she perceived this and wished to ascertain the reason for it Clare led the conversation at once to the topic of the younger Wallace Armstrong.

"Now that I see you by the light," she said, "you are really very much alike. But I think your eyes have more gray about them; your cousin's are wholly blue."

"My hair has more gray about it too," he remarked, sardonically.

"Has it? I hadn't noticed that. But do you know I so much admire gray hair on young men? It is so piquant, I think! Then you are taller and bigger than the Wallace Armstrong we know; and you wear a moustache, while he is clean-shaved."

"Yes—a moustache is the one thing Lorin can't cultivate successfully," he sneered. "But he is so eminently lucky in every other respect that he ought not to mind that one deficiency."

"Then your voices are different, very different," Clare continued, standing before him with her head on one side reflectively, and speaking with the air of ingenuous innocence she knew so well how to assume. "There are just tones now and then which resemble your cousin's, but not many."

"My voice is not adapted to cooing and flattering, as his is!" he retorted, with sudden savagery. "It has had no practice in such arts."

"It is odd," Clare said, affecting not to notice his growing anger, "that we did not see you when we visited your uncle's house last Wednesday afternoon!"

"Oh, I am kept in the background!" he returned, with a short laugh. "I am not pretty or nice-mannered

enough to be shown to visitors; and they have never thought of a cage for me, with 'Keep away—he bites!' as a warning inscription. My cousin is the show animal, with nice, tea-drinking, tennis-playing manners. My roughness frightens people. Why, I have already frightened your friend here, as you see."

Clare glanced at Laline. The latter was sitting with her eyes fixed, in fascinated dislike, upon the third occupant of the room. Perhaps she hardly realised how clearly her features expressed the disgust with which he inspired her. But Wallace saw it and winced under it. No woman in his sober moments had contemplated him like that yet, and he felt he hated both her and himself for that look.

"I ought to have introduced you!" cried Clare. "How stupid of me! Lina, this is our Mr. Armstrong's cousin, and he thinks he frightened you. Isn't that absurd?"

"Very. I am not at all afraid of Mr. Armstrong."

"By—— But you shall be!" was the thought that sprang into life in Wallace's mind as he noted the quiet scorn of her tones. He turned to look at her as she sat by the fire in her soft white draperies, with slender hands clasped loosely round her knee, one foot on a stool before her, and her head a little thrown back. She looked very beautiful at that moment and her beauty struck into his heart like a dull pain. There was something proud and aloof in her appearance of icy purity and reserve; and when he contrasted her present haughtiness of bearing with the passionate demonstrativeness with which she had, as she thought, flung herself into the arms of his cousin a few moments before, a bitter anger was stirred within him.

Why should she lavish caresses upon Lorin and treat him—Wallace—like a dog?

He would make her pay for it, for certain, and he was

not a man to register a vow of vengeance against any one and fail to make it good.

He could not guess that Laline's appearance of scornful quiet was to a great extent the result of the tumult of emotions which agitated her. A fierce despair held possession of her heart. She seemed to see, lying in ruins about her feet, the beautiful castle in the air that love had built; and the dirge of a love that must die was ringing in her ears as an accompaniment to every word he uttered. This extreme tension of feeling kept her rigid as a statue, outwardly cold, but with heart and brain on fire. Her every nerve was in quivering rebellion against Fate, which had linked her to this man she hated, while with all her soul she longed to be the wife of another. And so she sat, within a few feet of her husband, preternaturally pale and still, her heart throbbing with a woman's passionate love and as passionate grief under her white conventual gown; and Wallace looked and hated her for her scornful pride, and hated his cousin for having won her love, and told himself that he would punish the pair of them if the chance should come in his way.

But to Clare his visit was a disappointment.

"He is rough and rather dreadful," she said to herself, "but comparatively sober. I hoped he would be mad with drink, as he was last Wednesday, and as he often is, or I would never have asked him to come."

CHAPTER XX.

CLARE CAVAN had wholly misunderstood the man with whom she had to deal when, by means of an anonymous letter, signed "A Well-Wisher," which she herself had delivered at his lodgings on the previous evening, she had summoned Wallace Armstrong the elder to her aunt's house.

From what her friends at the skating-party had told her she imagined him to be a degraded sot, lost to all sense of decency, barely sane, and utterly unpresentable.

"Awful thing for that poor young fellow Wallace Armstrong!" her friend Mr. Fitzroy Cleaver had confided to her. "He's got a cousin who's rather like him in appearance, and has the same name too, which is playing it very low down on a fellow. This chap—the other Wallace Armstrong, you know—is always getting had up for assault and drunkenness and all that sort of thing; and old Alexander Wallace has to pay to have the things kept out of the papers. He's been sent out of the country more than once, but always comes back, like a bad ha'penny. The last scandal about him was in the summer; my sister has a copy of the newspaper about it somewhere. I believe his uncle has disowned him since then. I am not quite sure but what he's doing 'time' now for that. People like that ought to be shut up—don't you think so? He'll only end by committing a murder or something unpleasant of that sort if he's left at large; and think how horrid that will be for his family!"

From her hostess, Mr. Cleaver's sister-in-law, Clare

received the paragraph she showed to Laline, and other details concerning the reprobate in question.

"I had no idea what the creature was like, my dear; and, when he introduced himself to me at Hurlingham as a cousin of Mr. Armstrong and a nephew of Alexander Wallace, it never occurred to me to be on my guard against him. I made the terrible mistake of inviting him to dinner. Luckily, it was only ourselves and two very old friends. My dear child, when he arrived he was already half tipsy! Of course I affected not to notice it and tried to keep things out of his way; but it was of no use. He drank fearfully during dinner and grew very noisy and insulting. As to joining the ladies afterwards—he was hardly capable of standing upright and wanted to fight the butler—such an excellent man! He had been with us five years, and was really almost to be depended upon not to steal too much wine—and that is high praise for a butler! But this dreadful Armstrong person struck out at him and upset him so much that he gave notice the next morning. Mr. Armstrong used fearful language too, and made my parlour-maid cry by trying to kiss her when she handed him his hat. Dreadful, wasn't it? I assure you I didn't get over it for weeks. And the next time I heard of him he was in prison, where he richly deserved to be. My dear, such a person should be sent to an institution for dipsomaniacs or shipped to the Colonies! I believe he hates his cousin, whom he accuses of supplanting him in his uncle's favour, and that he will try and murder him some day."

Of Mr. Wallace Armstrong the elder's rough brutality Clare herself could bear personal evidence. Curiosity had led her on the occasion of her visit to Alexander Wallace's house to peer into the room on the top floor adjoining the studio; and she would not easily forget

the momentary vision she had had of a man's face, red and swollen by drink and fury, which appeared at the doorway, or the violence with which, to an accompaniment of curses, she had been thrust from the room. The incident at the time had been inexplicable to her, although with characteristic mendacity she had made use of it to endeavour to prejudice Laline against the younger Armstrong. But as soon as she learned of the existence of the scapegrace cousin, recently released from gaol, who was forbidden his uncle's house and only frequented it by stealth, she judged rightly that it was he whom she had seen upon the evening in question.

She was far too spiteful to communicate her intelligence to Laline, and thoroughly enjoyed the latter's evident distress when she was led to believe that the man charged with repeated drunkenness and assault was her lover. Clare knew quite well that only a few words would suffice to remove this misconception from Laline's mind, and that she must therefore devise some new plan by which to revenge herself upon her. Understanding as she did to some extent the other girl's sensitive and impressionable nature, she decided that the coarse insults of a half-insane drunkard, who was the near relation of her affianced husband, would be infinitely painful to Laline, and that a visit paid by his disreputable cousin to his lady-love would deeply distress the younger Armstrong.

With this conviction, Clare had sat down on the preceding evening and indited the following letter, in a disguised handwriting, to the elder Wallace, whose address she had learned from her friends.

"SIR—I have never met you, but I have heard of you, and how you, the elder and the legal heir, have been cruelly and unjustly supplanted in your uncle's heart

and your uncle's home—which last should certainly be yours—by the cunning tricks of your younger cousin. Although a stranger, I have a fellow-feeling for you, as I too have had my rightful place in the affections of my relations usurped by an interloper. It is only fair that you should know that your cousin is now engaged to be married to a lady who has never even heard of your existence, and who is marrying him for your uncle's money, to which she believes him to be heir. In justice to yourself and to her, can you not see her and tell her the truth? She resides with Mrs. Vandeleur, the celebrated palmist, at 21, St. Mary's Crescent, Kensington. If you call, you might pretend to consult her.

“A WELL-WISHER.”

Instead of the tipsy maniac she had confidently expected, this letter had produced a man of sardonic humour and rough and unpleasant manners, but undeniably sane and passably sober—a man, too, of strikingly handsome appearance, however marred by an ill-regulated life; and Clare, wholly ignorant of the deadly blow struck at Laline's happiness by his very existence, felt that her shot had missed fire.

Tea was brought in at this point and refused with some disdain by the visitor. With a sickening pang of remembrance, Laline recalled the fact that at Boulogne Wallace had never partaken of tea.

“Liquids that didn't intoxicate weren't worth swallowing,” he had declared; and as a child she had been shocked and startled by such a statement until he had managed to convince her that he was joking. How could she have been so blind, so foolish, as to suppose that such a man as this could develop into the Wallace Armstrong she had grown to love? This creature before her was but the man of four years ago, with all his evil

habits, his roughness of manners, his scorn for his fellow-creatures, his cynicism, and his degraded tastes intensified; and a shudder ran through her at the thought that, but for her flight on her wedding-day, she would be even now his property, his chattel, dragged down in all possibility to his level.

"Not that! I should be dead!" was the cry that rose within her heart at the thought.

And yet she was his wife! Those few words spoken before the English Consul by a reckless adventurer and an ignorant child had made her his for life, even though he ignored her existence, even though she had given her heart and her word to another.

A shudder ran through her at the thought, and involuntarily her dark eyes turned upon him again with a look in which hate and fear were mingled. Meeting his gaze, she quickly averted her own; but that second look had the effect of completely sobering Wallace.

The intensity of contempt and dislike it suggested was a revelation to him. Demoralised as he was, he would rather have faced any danger than this girl's quiet scorn, and the aversion she entertained against him, which her sensitive face unmistakably betrayed, attracted his attention to her as nothing else could have done.

As he watched her, a dull resentment against his cousin grew stronger within him at every moment. It was impossible that this girl could look at him and speak to him as she had done if her mind had not been poisoned against him. That her haughty coldness was assumed he knew from the manner in which she had at first greeted him. It must certainly be Lorin who had made her hate him in advance, and for this Lorin should be made to suffer.

"You expect my cousin this afternoon, I believe?" he said, addressing Clare, abruptly.

"Don't ask me," the young lady replied, archly; "you must ask my friend, Miss Grahame. Lina dear, do you expect Mr. Armstrong to-day?"

"I think not."

"Think? Surely you know, darling! When you were skating at his uncle's house at Hampstead yesterday, didn't he make any appointment to come to-day? But perhaps I oughtn't to ask."

"Were you at the Homestead yesterday?" Wallace asked, his face changing suddenly.

"Yes."

"It's a charming old house, is it not?" Clare asked him, innocently.

"Oh, you mustn't ask me!" he answered, with an assumption of carelessness. "I am not allowed inside it, and I haven't seen even the outside for ten years now. You must know, Miss Cavan, that during that time I have been a pariah, driven from my home, and sent as a scapegoat into the wilderness. You know the Prodigal Son story; well, I am the prodigal nephew, only there wasn't any outlay on veal on my account! And so far from my excellent industrious apprentice of a cousin having to turn out for me, it is only by his condescending charity that I am enabled to live at all! He has my uncle's confidence and affection, and no doubt he will have his money. He has his position in Wallace's Bank and will be made a partner there very shortly. He lives in clover in the best rooms in the house and the Homestead is practically his own property already. Everywhere in society he is courted and *fêted*—he is such a charming-mannered man, you see, and wears such nice clothes, and, best of all, he will be Alexander Wallace's heir. Consequently, beautiful girls, all saintly pride and touch-me-not coldness towards poor broken-down disinherited devils like me, carney to my cousin, and throw

themselves into his arms, declaring that they can't live without him, and should have gone mad had he stayed away one moment longer. Oh, it's the way of the world, Miss Cavan! Your vestal virgin of the present day is ice to the man with no banking-account, but thaws marvellously in the presence of a fellow with ready cash and expectations. The men who go under need expect no sympathy nor any civility. The really good women are so busy making love to and marrying the eligibles that they have no time to waste on the others; and the modern prodigal son, if he ventured back to his father's villa, would be insulted on the doorstep by his younger brother's *fiancée*, who would look at him as if he were dirt, and speak to him as if he were a dog. That, at least, is my experience of women!"

He had risen while he spoke, and now towered massively in the centre of the room, his hands clenched, his face pale with anger, which he with difficulty repressed from breaking into a storm of fury. Although nominally addressing Clare, he stared across at Laline where she sat with lowered eyes by the fire, and clearly directed his diatribe against her.

Clare glanced from one to the other, barely able to conceal her delight at the turn things were taking. To hear Laline insulted was balm to Miss Cavan; and she with difficulty kept a note of triumph out of her voice as she begged Mr. Armstrong to resume his seat and not to distress himself.

"It must be very hard to feel yourself supplanted, as you say," she purred in her soft tones; "but really I can't allow you to speak so severely against women! I am sure that many—indeed, most of them—sympathise with the unfortunate, and that we are not all mercenary. I for one am extremely sorry for you, and so, I am sure, is Miss Grahame—aren't you, Lina dear!"

Laline did not speak; and after a few seconds of silence Wallace took up his tale again.

"You are most kind, Miss Cavan," he said; "but you are injudiciously so when you lavish sympathy upon an unsuccessful man. Your friend Miss Grahame is, if I may say so, far more business-like. She metes out devotion to the rich man and scorn to the poor one in admirably calculating fashion."

Challenged thus directly, Laline slowly rose from her seat, quivering in every limb, and almost as white as her dress.

"My affection and respect are not given to your cousin because he is rich, Mr. Armstrong," she said in a low voice that vibrated with intense feeling, "but because he is a frank and loyal and honourable gentleman, honest in his dealings with men, and gentle and chivalrous to all women. I have never heard of you until to-day, but now that I have seen you my warmest sympathy goes to your cousin. Please let me pass!"

Her soft dark eyes literally blazed with excitement as she waved him imperiously aside and passed from the room, leaving Clare and Wallace standing opposite each other, subdued with sudden quiet by Laline's words and by the note of passionate indignation and despair they could not understand which thrilled through her voice.

"I can't understand Lina," Clare protested, after a pause; "she is usually so gentle. I am afraid you and she have taken a dislike to each other."

"How long has she known my cousin?" her companion inquired.

"Oh, she has only met him two or three times! I myself had no idea that there was anything at all between them until yesterday, when she was out with him all the afternoon; but this morning she confessed to me

that she was engaged to him. It seems so very strange, as dear Lina had never given me or my aunt the least hint of such a thing. But of course I am extremely glad for her sake, as she is an orphan, poor child, and hasn't a penny——"

"Why do you say you are glad," Wallace interrupted, bluntly, "when in reality you are bitterly angry? Do you suppose I haven't guessed who wrote me that letter I got last night telling me to call here to-day?"

"What can you mean?"

"Oh, humbug is no good with me, Miss Cavan!" he said, laughing scornfully. "You've got your knife into this Grahame girl, and into my cousin too, for some reason best known to you. Did you want to marry him yourself?"

"Really, Mr. Armstrong——"

"Oh, it's no use turning on injured innocence for me! I never yet met the woman whose word I believed. If you want to know how it was I guessed you wrote me that letter, I'll tell you in a very few words. In it you spoke about sympathising with me and being very sorry for me; and you used the same expressions this evening. Well, no one is really sorry for me—why should they be? My troubles are of my own making; and if I get disinherited, it is entirely my own fault. What are you opening those pretty wicked-looking eyes for? Are you so little accustomed to truth that it startles you to hear it? I say my troubles are my own fault, because my uncle cares more for my little finger than for my cousin's whole body. Being a narrow-minded and a tediously pious and virtuous old nuisance himself, he has a secret love for a thorough-paced scamp. I have only to pretend to reform for a few weeks to get what I liked out of him; but I can't be bothered with it. For years roughing it among bad company in the Colonies took away all the

taste for civilised society I ever had, which was never much. I can't sit hour after hour tied to a desk quill-driving; I can't pretend to interest myself in tomes and ledgers and bills-of-exchange any more than I can talk twaddle in a drawing-room over sloppy tea, or play lawn-tennis with a lot of prim bread-and-butter misses without a word to say for themselves. If I think a woman pretty, I tell her so; if I feel inclined to make love, I do so. I am made to lead my own life, to eat and drink and walk and sleep and fight and make love, and perhaps get drunk and get sober again, but it must be in my own way. No one can drive me, and no one presumes to pity me. Consequently, it wasn't difficult for me to guess that this pretty but unnecessary sympathy of yours was only a trick of speech to serve your own ends. Do you understand, Miss Cavan?"

"I understand," she replied, a rare blush creeping over her white skin, "that you are frightfully impertinent!"

"I mean to be more impertinent yet," he said, and, suddenly stooping, kissed her.

"That is the way to treat pretty women who tell lies," he observed, coolly picking up his hat as he spoke. "And, now that I have sampled both the young ladies, I won't stop and see the old one. You and I are friends, Miss Cavan, and you may rely on me to do you a good turn if it suits my book also. As to this proposed marriage of my angelic cousin with that infernally proud stuck-up girl, I'm no more minded to it than you. I should dearly love to pay her out for her insolence, and I have little doubt that an opportunity will come in my way. You know who obligingly finds mischief for idle hands. Well, mine are always idle. There's some one coming in down-stairs—your aunt, I expect. Give me another kiss before she comes. Oh, don't pretend to be

offended; it's silly waste of time! Girls with eyes like yours—*les yeux en coulisse*—always like kisses! And who knows? I am worth encouraging, for I may be my uncle's heir after all."

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE is a cynical French proverb which states that the worse the man, the better he understands women.

In the case of the two Armstrongs the saying was so far true that Wallace Armstrong the elder, after only half-an-hour's intercourse, gauged to a nicety the mental and moral attributes of Clare Cavan, of which his cousin had but an elementary notion. He admired her beauty, and looked with amusement on her untruthfulness, her slyness, and her envious disposition. Vanity and sensuality were two qualities he always expected to find in women, and he at once recognised them as leading characteristics of Clare's nature. She belonged to a type he thoroughly understood; and he knew perfectly well that in her secret heart she would not in the least resent the insolently-worded admiration or the careless caresses of a man as handsome as himself, even though she believed herself to be in love with his cousin. Like many another man who professes to understand women, however, Wallace Armstrong had gained his experience among the least worthy members of a sex which he in consequence thought himself justified in scorning. Love of money and love of themselves were, in his opinion, the two ruling motives in every woman's life; and by appealing strongly enough to either of these, any man could make a conquest of any woman—a conquest which, when made, would be, in Wallace's opinion, not worth

having. These ideas, which he freely professed, only made him the more popular with such women as came in his way, and he was able from experience to calculate exactly the effect of his unconventional behaviour upon Clare Cavan.

That young lady was not accustomed to being found out. Her drawing-room triumphs had not prepared her for this rough-and-ready style of address; but she relished it none the less, belonging as she did to the type of woman who secretly worships a bully. Her intense vanity led her to believe that the elder Armstrong had fallen in love with her at first sight; and she would have been deeply mortified had she known that his sole reason for ingratiating himself with her, and presently with Mrs. Vandeleur, was that he might have opportunities of meeting the girl who had been introduced to him as Lina Grahame. Clare Cavan's kiss he instantly forgot; but Lina Grahame's look of scorn and hatred seemed to burn into his soul.

How dared she—a penniless companion, a prudish, calculating, fortune-hunter, intent on securing a wealthy husband—how dared she gaze at him as though he were a thing accursed? Not for a moment could he forget her dark eyes, distended with horror, as they fixed themselves upon him, or the disdainful curve of her sweet red mouth, or the tone in which she said she loved Lorin for being an honourable gentleman, but pitied him since she had met his cousin.

For years he had not wished for anything so ardently as he now longed to humble this girl's pride and give her back scorn for scorn. Her face lingered persistently in his mind; he had but to close his eyes to recall every feature with absolute distinctness, even the two perpendicular lines between her eyebrows when she frowned, and the quick trick of her fingers pushing her hair from

her brow, seeming strangely familiar to him. It was presumably the sympathy of hate, he told himself, which made her image so clear and dominant in his mind. Yet he lingered at Mrs. Vandeleur's, in the hope that Lina Grahame might again appear, for fully an hour after the elder lady's return.

His handsome appearance and surly manners interested Mrs. Vandeleur, who promptly prophesied all manner of evil things for him from a cursory study of his hand and face.

"You have quite a remarkably wicked hand!" she exclaimed, bending over it with a touch of genuine excitement. "Decidedly you were born under an evil star, for you bring misfortunes to yourself and to other people alike; and what is more curious, you appear to deserve them. I am really afraid of telling you more, lest I should hurt your feelings."

"Not a bit. I am accustomed to strong language on the subject of my character, from my relations and from police-court officials alike."

"You have no moral principles whatever," continued the little lady, turning over his large, well-shaped, but, truth to tell, not over-clean hand with her delicate be-ringed fingers. "You are wholly unreliable and most ungrateful; your passions are violent, and you make no attempt to control them. You are selfish to the core——"

"Pray stop the catalogue of my deficiencies, Mrs. Vandeleur, or your niece here will fall madly in love with me!"

"Your past has been troubled and stormy, and your future looks very black," continued the little lady, quite unmoved by his sarcasm. "Only one thing can save you—the love of a good, pure woman."

She uttered the words with her usual slow impressive-

ness, letting his hand fall as she finished speaking; and, although he affected to treat the matter lightly, her words rang through Wallace's brain when he left her house a little later in the evening.

It was a miserably dull and gloomy evening, bitterly cold and shrouded in fog. There was some excuse for spirit-drinking under the circumstances; but Wallace did not require an excuse for the constant whiskies-and-sodas and "nips" of raw brandy in which he indulged at all hours of the day and night when free from his cousin's watchful care. Since his imprisonment he had been lodging in a street off the Strand; and, although he was forbidden to enter Alexander Wallace's house, his cousin encouraged his visits there in the hope of keeping him out of mischief. It was easy enough for him to summon Adams by knocking in a peculiar manner agreed upon between them, and then to slip up-stairs to Lorin's rooms, where he was sure of warmth and comfort and a hearty welcome. Old Alexander was aware that his orders regarding his elder nephew were set at naught, and he was well pleased that it should be so. Wallace had angered and shamed him so deeply that his name was a forbidden subject in the household, and the old gentleman affected to believe that he had only one nephew. That his sister's child, whom he had brought up from a boy and loved as his own son, should be convicted of drunkenness and brutal violence and sent to prison with hard labour, had been a terrible blow to the old man, from whom Lorin had often contrived to keep his cousin's delinquencies a secret. The disgrace of the whole affair went nigh to break Alexander's heart, and none the less so because he had always most unreasonably loved his elder nephew the better of the two.

Lorin was now seven-and-twenty; and since his

parents' death, eighteen years before, he had been adopted by his uncle, to whom he had been in every way a credit. Beyond a few school scrapes, the result of boyish high spirits, and a little unnecessary expenditure at college, there had been no fault to find with him. He had been a good, even a brilliant scholar, and had won the liking and esteem of all who had to do with him as a growing lad; and when arrived at man's estate the same tale was true. Although disinclined for office-work, he had set himself to master the entire business at the bank, with the result that his opinion was already of value in the house, while outside among general society he was extremely popular and everywhere in great request.

With his cousin it was far otherwise. As a mere baby he had been placed in Alexander Wallace's care by the latter's elder sister, a woman of passionate and ungovernable temper, very unhappily married to a man from whom she was speedily separated. The heart of the old bachelor-uncle went out to the handsome black-haired baby boy at first sight, and no subsequent delinquencies on Wallace's part could wholly alienate from him his uncle's love. By turns he was expelled from school, "plucked" for examinations, rusticated from college, and gradually shunned by the more respectable and law-abiding of his acquaintances. A fierce, sardonic temper and instinctive rebellion against all constituted authority characterised him from early boyhood, and his uncle's indulgence, while it bred in him no reciprocal affection, developed to the full the boy's intensely selfish nature and extravagant disposition. As a lad he possessed considerable charm of manner, despite his intractable disposition; and from the time when, at the respective ages of nine and twelve, the two cousins first met, Lorin had loved and shielded him, often taking upon himself the blame

for Wallace's misdemeanours, and showing towards his elder an affectionate forbearance which the latter was wholly incapable of appreciating.

At twenty-one, Wallace Armstrong forged his uncle's name on several separate occasions, chiefly in order to settle his heavy gambling debts, some of which he had contracted at the club kept at one time by Captain Garth, Laline's father.

Then followed years of banishment, spent for the most part in gambling-dens, hotel-bars, and billiard-rooms, among the male and female "riff-raff" of the Colonies, leading up to the moment of Wallace's return to Europe, and his memorable meeting with Captain Garth in the market-place of Boulogne.

From the time of his return to his uncle's house, under his cousin Lorin's care, in deep mourning for the youthful bride of whom typhoid fever had, so he said, deprived him, Wallace Armstrong's conduct had grown daily worse. At the beginning he did indeed make some pretence of earning his living as a clerk in his uncle's employment; but his unpunctuality, his carelessness, and his habit of appropriating as his own any loose change that might pass through his hands, speedily proved his unsuitability for such a position. Both Lorin and his uncle set to work to find some out-door occupation which such a ne'er-do-well might find within his powers; but Wallace's total unreliability, his insolence and laziness, together with his intemperate habits, rendered him undesirable in any wage-earning capacity whatever. He did not like work and had no intention of working, and he detested regular hours and the conventions of peaceable citizenship. But for Lorin's incessant care and kindness and the generosity with which he denied himself in order to provide his cousin with more than the mere necessities of life, Wallace would have

gone under long before. Yet he was in no way grateful to Lorin, but cherished against him a bitter snarling envy which he did not scruple to express in words.

"I know you enjoy unselfishness and that sort of thing," he would say, while pocketing his cousin's money, "so I won't deprive you of the chance of feeling virtuous. This doling out pocket-money to me, and filling up my whiskies with your infernal soda-water, and bailing me out when I am run in, all places you in a beautiful light of self-sacrifice and stained-glass-window sort of nobility and charity. The prodigal son's brother made a great mistake in openly grudging the outlay on the other fellow; it would have paid him better in the long run to have pretended a great concern for his welfare, as you do for mine."

On this particular evening, when Wallace found himself in the Crescent outside Mrs. Vandeleur's house, he did not feel in the mood for his favourite amusement of sneering at his cousin. Certain things he had seen and heard during the course of his visit had made an unusually strong impression upon his ordinarily callous and drink-sodden brain.

"I love your cousin because he is a frank and loyal and honourable gentleman—honest in his dealings with men, and gentle and chivalrous to all women."

He could hear the words now ringing through his head in those sweet deep tones of a voice which was oddly familiar to him.

Had this Lina Graham known him intimately instead of being a complete stranger to him, she could scarcely have chosen words more calculated to wound him by emphasising the differences between him and his cousin.

Frank and loyal, honourable and honest, gentle and chivalrous!

Not one of those qualities was to be found in Wallace,

and he knew it. Even his apparent brusque truthfulness was assumed, and he could, if the occasion served, lie with apparent directness and simplicity. Women in general, or, at least, such women as he met, liked a man the better for his bad reputation; but this little prude in white was clearly not of these. He hated to recall the scorn of her gaze; it pricked and stung him even while he endeavoured to drown all clear remembrance in copious draughts of fiery fluid. To-night, as he wandered from one to another of his usual haunts, the miserable futility of the life he led came before him for the first time. In the clear eyes of a girl he saw himself mirrored and shrank in horror and disgust at the reflection.

In his thirty-first year, what was he but a homeless waif, a gaol-bird and a drunkard, subsisting upon charity, and biting the hand that fed him? Wallace buried his head in his hands and groaned aloud at the thought. Among the common and degraded persons by whom he was surrounded not one dared to ask what ailed him, for his surly and insolent temper was well known. Looking up and around him, he felt that he hated his companions, and that the coarse joviality which he had hitherto commended as unconventional was mere forced drunken buffoonery. Lina Grahame would know her contempt to be justified could she see him among such surroundings. With a muttered oath, and leaving his glass unemptied, he strode out again into the night. The fog got into his throat and choked him, the streets were deserted, but for a passing policeman on his beat and a few pedestrians loudly complaining of the bitter frost and hurrying home.

Home! Wallace had no home. His landlady had already more than once given him notice to quit; there would certainly be neither fire nor welcome awaiting him there. As to his uncle's house, he could indeed slip

in there on the sly; but he had given his word to his cousin not to present himself there when he had been drinking too freely, and of a certainty he had been drinking too freely to-night.

What right had Lorin to extract such a promise—Lorin, to whom drink offered no temptation? What right had such a man to make rules of conduct for others? Doubtless he was sitting comfortably by the fire in his well-furnished rooms, thinking of Lina Grahame, and writing letters to her, or reading hers to him, or perhaps sketching her portrait. Warmth and comfort, the glow of the fire, and sweet thoughts of his love for him; the cold and dirty streets, the fog and frost, the flaring lights of a gin palace, and the thought of a woman's scorn, for his cousin. Very soon Lorin would marry, and then his, Wallace's, surreptitious visits to his uncle's house would be forbidden altogether. He could hear the voice in which she would speak the order concerning them.

"Lorin dear, you must really keep your cousin away. His very appearance is a disgrace to you. He is not fit to enter a gentleman's house."

In some such words she would speak, in that voice which to Wallace was like an echo from the past. And to-morrow she would tell Lorin about his disreputable cousin's visit, while she twined her arms about his neck and clung to him as she had clung to Wallace that evening when she had mistaken his identity.

He could feel the clasp of her fingers upon his shoulders now, and the silky softness of her hair as he stroked it, and the quiver that ran through her frame as he clasped her supple waist. She loved Lorin—there was little doubt of that. Passionate love thrilled through her touch, thrilled in her voice when she murmured—

"You have come at last!"

No good woman had ever loved him—no good woman had ever clung to him and welcomed his coming with such whole-hearted delight. What had that little witch woman prophesied about him?

“Your past has been stormy. Your future looks black. Only one thing can save you—the love of a pure, good woman.”

The fact that he was really married seldom if ever troubled him. If it came into his mind at all, the remembrance provoked only curses on the head of his missing wife. Had she only proved reasonable, he might now have been installed with her in that very house at Hampstead which would soon be prepared for the reception of Lorin and his bride. Wallace cursed them both as he thought of them and of the happiness that awaited them. Fate had been against him, luck had been against him. His evil instincts, his ungovernable temper, his hatred of authority and love of violent pleasures, had been born with him and had led him on to the shipwreck of his life.

Only the love of a good woman could save him, Mrs. Vandeleur had said. But good women looked at him with the eyes of Lina Grahame.

“Curse her!” he muttered, as he tossed down the raw spirit in his glass. “I wish, with all my soul, that I could do her an injury!”

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Laline left the study and fled up-stairs to her room, she had by no means terminated her adventures for the day.

At first she could do nothing but sit with her hands

tightly clasped in her lap, half-numbed by the extent of her misfortune. Her folly in failing to distinguish between the two cousins appeared to her now equally inexcusable and incomprehensible. Gradually, as she collected in her mind the evidence upon which she had acted, a conviction strengthened within her mind that she had been only too desirous of deceiving herself.

"I loved him, and so I persisted in believing he was my husband!" was the despairing cry of her heart. She had fallen in love at first with the younger Wallace Armstrong, and had encouraged herself in loving him by assuring herself that she was his wife already. This was now the first week in February, the month in which they were to have been married. Laline sprang from her chair at the thought and pressed her hands to her burning cheeks.

"How can I tell him?" she cried aloud. "How can I say that I must break it off and that we must never meet again, when only yesterday I kissed him and let him kiss me, and promised to be his wife? It is all horrible—impossible! What excuse can I give that he will believe? I cannot go to him and say, 'I will not marry him because I am his cousin's wife!' No one must ever know that. I would a thousand times rather die at this moment than be claimed by that horrible man, the very sight of whom turns me sick with disgust and hate! How could I ever think that Lorin, my Lorin, could have acted like that at Boulogne, could have ever been a gambler and a forger, ungrateful, deceitful, selfish, dissipated, and worthless?"

A wave of joy passed over her heart, in spite of her grief and perplexity, at the thought that the man she loved was in very truth the honourable and chivalrous gentleman Mrs. Vandeleur had declared him to be. Like Tennyson's "Lily maid of Astolat," Laline felt it was—

“Her glory to have loved
One peerless, without stain.”

She had been ready to take him as her husband in spite of all she remembered and all she heard against him, but now that she knew his record to be absolutely clear she loved him the more. Tears rushed from her eyes as she realised that the happy life they had planned together could never be theirs. She must banish him from her sight; or, if he would not obey her entreaties and commands, she must herself pass out of his life and begin a new career in some place out of his reach and ken.

Until she met him, the prospect of a busy existence uncheered by the love of a man had not appeared specially formidable to Laline. But now her future life seemed to stretch before her as an arid plain, cheerless, and dreary, the mere thought of which made her shudder.

“I cannot live without him!” she sobbed. “I cannot live without his love! Why did he come into my life at all, if it was only to offer me a taste of happiness which I must never hope for again? It is too hard, too cruel!”

Rebellious, passionate thoughts rose in her mind, thoughts at which her own soul took fright. Through the fog the church-bells pealed out, faint and muffled; but Laline grew calmer at the sound. Her early training had been deeply religious, and now, in this hour of loneliness and despair, she sought comfort and refuge from her distracting grief in the service of the church.

Hastily slipping on her hat and cloak and the furs which Lorin had bought for her on the preceding day, she hurried down the stairs and out of the house unnoticed by any of the other inmates. To her aching

heart and tired brain the quiet of the sacred building, the dignified yet simple words of the service she knew so well, and the sermon, taken from a beautiful passage in St. John's Gospel, proved infinitely soothing, and the mere act of supplication brought with it a sense of strength and coming help.

She had prayed to be taught what was her duty, and rising from her knees at the close of the service, tired out with the emotions of the day and very pale, her eyes red with long weeping and her lips quivering in the endeavour to keep back her tears, she passed out of the church with the rest of the congregation.

A walk of a very few minutes led to the opening of St. Mary's Crescent, and Laline was hastening thither, a little dazed by the fog and darkness after the brightly-lighted church, when some one laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"At last, my darling!"

She had known by his touch, which thrilled her with delight, that it was Lorin even before she had seen or heard him; and in the first moment of joy at the unexpected meeting she turned on him a face radiant with love and welcome. The light from a gas-lamp at the side of the pavement fell full upon her, and Lorin started back.

"My darling, how pale you are! And you have been crying! What has troubled you?"

His words recalled the truth to her. She turned away and strove to answer coldly.

"My head aches this evening," she said. "I must get off to bed early. I—I dare say it is the fog."

"Let me come in with you and speak to Mrs. Vandeleur about you. I have a great deal to say to her."

"No, no—not to-night, and not until you have spoken

to me first! You must come to-morrow and have a long talk with me. It is too late now, and I feel ill and tired—very tired!”

He drew her hand tenderly through his arm.

“You are crying again, my dear one!” he said. “I have a right to know what is troubling you. Let me take you home and stay with you a little while. Mrs. Vandeleur will, I am sure, excuse the informality of the visit now that she knows that we are so soon to be married.”

“She knows nothing of all that.”

“What? You have not told her?”

“Not yet. Don’t be vexed, Lorin. I have not even seen her since you left me at the door last night.”

“Well, at least you have told Miss Cavan?”

“Yes,” Laline admitted, reluctantly, “I did say something about you to Miss Cavan.”

“Something about me? Well, I suppose I must be content with that! But, Lina dear, are you so very much ashamed of me that you don’t like to mention to any one that we are engaged?”

“No, of course not! How can you ask such an absurd question! But”—and here Laline was seized by a brilliant idea—“you know Mrs. Vandeleur will be very much annoyed at the idea of losing me just when I am beginning to be so useful to her as a secretary. We are exceedingly busy over her two books, and she has often told me that my value to her lies in the fact that my mind is not distracted by thoughts of love or money. She has been exceedingly kind to me, and it really seems too bad to talk about leaving her to get married almost as soon as we have started comfortably working together. It isn’t fair to her, you see.”

She spoke very fast, and lowered her head that he might not see the anxiety and distress in her eyes.

He laughed and drew her arm closer against his.

"Not fair to her!" he said. "How about being fair to me? Which is the more important—that Mrs. Vandeleur should lose an amanuensis to assist her in the compilation of her interesting but mischievous mysticism, or that you and I should miss the happiness of both our lives? Under the circumstances I should say it was rather wise of her to foretell terrible troubles to you should you fall in love. You are in love, I hope, dearest! And where are all these prophesied griefs and woes? No future can look brighter than ours."

She shuddered and clung closer to his arm. If he only knew!

"My uncle," Lorin continued, "is in the highest state of delight about our coming marriage. He wants you to have luncheon with him to-morrow. Bring Mrs. Vandeleur, if she will come at such short notice; but don't disappoint him. He was most anxious that I should bring you round to-day to receive his congratulations. I told him you had forbidden me to call until Monday. What I did not tell him was that I have been hanging round St. Mary's Crescent at intervals the whole day, hoping to catch you as you went in or out. I had a presentiment that you would be in trouble or low spirits, the result, I suppose, of a bad dream I had about you last night."

"What was that?"

"Oh, just as utterly meaningless and inconsequent as are most dreams! I thought I was in a forest, looking for you and following you. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of your white dress—you wore that gown you had on when I first saw you—glimmering through an opening in the trees. But as soon as I dashed forward in pursuit the branches closed together, as in the 'Sleeping Beauty' story, and you were lost to

me again, while the whole wood seemed filled with mocking laughter."

"What sort of laughter?" she inquired, eagerly. "Was it like the laughter of any one you know?"

"Why do you ask? Perhaps it was—a little. But, Lina dear, you are trembling. It is horribly selfish of me to keep you walking about in the fog when you told me you were so tired! Let me take you home!"

"No—not yet, Lorin! I have a great deal to say to you, and I must say it now while no one can hear me. I—I have been thinking deeply all to-day, and I have decided that you and I have been too hasty—we have not given ourselves time to know our own minds."

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "I felt sure something was weighing on your mind; but I can't listen here in the noise of the streets. We will pass into the Park while you tell me."

They had reached the Albert Hall, and he led her at this point into Hyde Park, deserted but for a few devoted sweethearts, as regardless as themselves of the cold and fog and frost.

"Now tell me again, dear," he said, gently, "what you have to say about our engagement!"

In the obscurity he slipped his arm about her waist, and at his touch a restful delight crept over her senses. For a few seconds she kept silence. Very soon they must part, and with a whole lifetime of dreary lovelessness before her, surely she might without great sin afford herself the momentary joy of revelling in his caresses.

But duty, stern and forbidding, lay before her, and suddenly nerving herself to the effort, she drew away from him.

"I have something to say to you," she began, "and I want you to walk quietly by my side listening, and not

to touch me while I speak. Lorin, we have made a great mistake; I, at least, know that I was only flirting with you. I had made up my mind before I met you not to marry, and I am still of the same mind. Let us just be friends again!"

"Never! We never have been friends, my darling, and we never can be! I loved you from the first moment when I heard your voice, from the first moment when I saw your face in the full lamplight. I was never your friend only, and I never shall be. I was and am your lover, and I shall be your husband!"

"I was only flirting!" she cried in desperation. "I thought you were in love with Clare Cavan! You flirted with her, I flirted with you. I—I have no real feeling for you at all! It was just a little petty triumph to get you away from her!"

The words died on her lips. He had stopped in the middle of the gravel-path and had drawn up her hands upon his shoulders.

"I told you not to touch me!" she faltered.

"Lina," he whispered, "Lina dear, even in fun I can't let you speak of yourself like that!"

He drew her tenderly into his arms. Her heart was beating madly and convulsive sobs began to shake her frame.

"Why do you torment me?" she cried, breaking into a storm of tears. "Can't you see that I am in earnest—that I am trying to find any excuse to free myself from my promise to you? I cannot marry you—I will not marry you! It is of no use to ask me for reasons! On my word of honour I am in earnest—I was never more in earnest in my life! It has all been a mistake from the beginning. I can never be your wife!"

"Lina!"

"It is of no use," she cried, hysterically, "to remon-

strate with me or to appeal to my feelings. I have no feelings where men are concerned. I was always a flirt—Mrs. Melville could have told you that. At Norwood the foreign masters used to propose to me; but I never cared. It is all vanity with me and I don't know what love means!"

"Lina!"

"Oh, don't stand repeating my name like that! It would be more dignified if you got angry. But nothing can make any difference. You might spend the rest of your life and mine on your knees to me, but I cannot marry you—cannot! Do you understand, Mr. Armstrong? It is all over, this love-story of ours, and all we have to do now is to forget it!"

Through all the hysterical excitement of her talk there rang a note of despair which Lorin failed not to recognise and for which he was greatly at a loss to account.

"Lina," he said, again, "you are ill and unstrung; you don't know what you are saying. Something very serious has happened to trouble you to-day. Presently, when you feel better and calmer, you must tell me all about it. But, my darling, it is useless to try and persuade me that you did not love me yesterday or that you do not love me now!"

"I do not!"

"Lina, it is horribly dark and foggy and you don't see very well with those lovely, tearful eyes of yours. But look up now into my face, with your hands in mine—so—and your heart beating near mine, and tell me again that you do not love me!"

She stood still as he directed, and, clasping her hands, he held them up against his breast. Her face was ashen pale and even her lips were white. She strove to keep up the pitch of unnatural nervous excitement to which

she had worked herself; but gradually, as he clasped her hands close in his, he felt their tension relax. Her form lost its defiant erectness; she quivered and swayed towards him, and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms.

"Oh, Lorin, Lorin, I am so unhappy! I think my heart will break!"

Very weak and pitiful her accents sounded now as, like a tired child, she rested her cheek upon his shoulder for a few seconds, weeping bitterly. Lorin asked her no questions and contented himself with gently soothing her. Presently her sobs ceased, and suddenly raising her head, she tried to laugh.

"It's like a servant on her 'Sunday out,' isn't it," she said, with a feeble attempt at cheerfulness, "to meet my 'young man' after church, and walk in Hyde Park, with his arm round my waist, crying? Servants, when they get engaged, always cry a great deal. I remember when our parlour-maid at Norwood got engaged to the baker, she used to shed floods of tears in the pantry, and even weep while waiting at table. She and her young man were perpetually having what she called 'words'—about three times a week it used to happen—and then Emma cried her eyes out until they made it up. And after all she married the postman."

"Well, and, now that we have had our 'words,' darling, and you have had your weeping, and we have made it up, since we are having our 'Sunday evening out' in the Park, and it's so dark one can't see across the road, you must kiss me in sign of reconciliation."

But she shrank away from him, remembering, with a pang, that she was another man's wife, and that her love for Lorin was no longer a pride to her but a grievous fault.

"Not now," she said; and then, before he had time to

complain of her coldness, she suddenly asked him why he had never, in speaking to her, alluded to his namesake and cousin.

Lorin did not answer for a moment, and when he spoke, it was in a somewhat constrained tone.

"I may not have mentioned him by name," he said, "but we have certainly alluded to him in our conversations. I have spoken to you of the responsibility I undertook more than five years ago, when I brought my cousin over from Boulogne to England after his wife's death——"

"You brought him over?"

"Yes. Uncle Alec thought he had reason to distrust him; but I believed my cousin's letters and went to him. It was a very sad and painful experience in many ways. He had only been married a month when the poor girl died. I was shown her grave and a picture of her, painted when she was a child. She must have been very pretty; but from what my cousin subsequently told me, I should say that she and old Garth, who called himself her uncle, but who impressed me very unfavourably, and who, I strongly suspect, was really her father, were nothing better than a couple of needy and swindling adventurers. Wallace always speaks of them both with intense bitterness; but Uncle Alec has never heard him, and persists in believing that this Laline is an angel of goodness, and that, had she lived, Wallace would have been very different. And I think he is probably right. A good wife is a man's salvation if she will only cling to him through good report and ill, and may well redeem him by her unselfish love."

"You overrate me, I know," Laline said, in a stifled voice, "and think me much better than I am. Tell me truly, Lorin, knowing me and knowing him, do you think that if your cousin Wallace had been married to

me, for instance, he would have been induced to lead a better life?"

He pressed both her hands tightly in his.

"It seems sacrilege," he exclaimed, "to think of you as married to him! But I believe that, if you had met him at the time I speak of, you might have saved him."

CHAPTER XXIII.

LORIN little guessed how his words, "You might have saved him," concerning his cousin Wallace stung Laline.

It was a view of the matter which had never presented itself to her that she had failed in her duty when she fled from her husband and her father at Boulogne. The formal and business-like contract before the Consul had meant so little to her, and the shock of discovering Wallace's real feelings and character was so great, that flight seemed the only course open to her at the time. But now, from the mouth of the man she loved, she heard the first judgment and condemnation of her conduct which had ever reached her, and as she walked on in silence by his side in her heart she rebelled against the sentence.

She was so young. What possible influence could a girl of sixteen have had over a man of determined temper and confirmed bad habits such as Wallace Armstrong? He did not even love her. Had she not heard him avow to her father that he considered her in the light of an encumbrance? More than that—his words had clearly foreshadowed the rough and even brutal treatment she would receive should she refuse to tell a

series of lies to gain his ends. And by her help he had attained them. He had been taken to England, had been received into his uncle's house and given that start in life of which he professed to stand in need. Had she sacrificed her life to him as well, what more could he have secured? He had had his chance and had miserably failed to make use of it. With a wife or without a wife, in all probability he would still have been the same worthless, reckless, ne'er-do-weel he had that evening shown himself to be.

Another point presented itself clearly to Laline in the pause that followed Lorin's speech. It was evident that he had formed an unfavourable opinion of his cousin's lost bride. On the strength of the falsified certificate and Wallace's misrepresentations he believed that she had been married for rather more than a month before she died. Should Laline therefore have been minded to tell him the whole truth, she would not only have had the greatest difficulty in making it credible and comprehensible to him, but she would have had to persuade him, in the face of her husband's and her late father's testimony and that of the certificate, that she had never been more than a nominal wife to his cousin.

A hot blush enveloped her from head to foot at the thought. Lorin was inclined to be jealous. How would he ever believe her again when he recalled her oft-repeated assertions that never before had she known the happiness of loving and being loved, and that his kisses were the first she had ever received, in the face of the fact of that early marriage?

To confide in him was clearly impossible. From what he had already stated as his opinions he might even think it right for her to go back to her husband, a course of which the mere idea sickened and terrified her. And

yet, while he ignored the fact of her marriage, how could she possibly sever the link between them?

"Lorin," she asked him, suddenly, "what would you do, loving me as you say you do—and I believe you—if some terrible obstacle were to come between us?"

"I should fight against it until it was destroyed, of course."

"No—don't answer lightly. I am in earnest—in terrible earnest! Suppose it was with you as with some people in a book I read not long ago—that you had, while very young, contracted a marriage, a wholly unsuitable marriage, with a woman, whom you had left immediately because you found you had been terribly mistaken in her; suppose that you saw and heard nothing of her for years, and that then, having good reason for believing your wife dead, you had met me—just as you did, you know—and had grown to love me, as a man can love, with all your heart and mind and soul?"

"Well?"

"Then—say, at just this point where we are now—either to-night or to-morrow—say that you learned that the woman you married was not dead, but that, so far from wanting you, she ignored your existence, that she was practically insane, and that you could neither get free from her nor render her the least assistance, what would you do? Now think well, dearest, before you answer, for a great deal depends upon it."

"What can you mean?"

"Nothing; but that, much as I love you, I can't love you wholly unless I understand you wholly. Remember how short a time we have really known each other. I know you always tell me the truth; and so, by putting these imaginary cases and learning how you would act in them, I can grow to understand you better. Tell me what you would do?"

"It's so difficult to say," he answered, after a short pause, knitting his brows. "And you have made it more difficult by something you have just said—'I know you always tell me the truth.' A man might be terribly tempted in such a case as you described to say nothing, and to seize his happiness while it lay within reach. Life is so short and happiness so hard to get. But, if a woman trusted a man as you say you trust me, that would be a cowardly and treacherous act towards her."

"How, cowardly and treacherous if it made her happy—if it would have broken her heart to part from him?"

"My darling, you are exciting yourself very unnecessarily over these imaginary difficulties! There are actually tears in your eyes! Surely life has enough worries without inventing others? Let us dismiss the subject and be happy together while we may."

"I can't be happy unless you satisfy me. I am fanciful to-night, I know, but my head aches; and—and please humour me, Lorin dear, and answer me about yourself and what you would do. Don't say 'a man might,' but 'I should do' so and so. Think again! If you told me the truth in such a case, I suppose the only word you could expect would be 'Good-bye'?"

"I wonder," he said, thoughtfully—"I wonder if you would say that?"

"No—I shouldn't—I couldn't!" she cried, suddenly clinging to his arm. "And if I refused to part from you, knowing all, what would you do?"

"I suppose a man ought to protect a woman even against herself," he replied. "But I don't like to think of what I might do if losing you were at stake. You see, Lina, I have been waiting for you all my life; and I am twenty-eight this year—approaching middle life, in

fact. Women have often charmed and interested me. I have wanted to talk to them, to sketch them, to look at them, but never to marry them. But as soon as I saw your face, and even before I saw it, when I had only stood near you and heard you speak, a voice within me said, 'That is my wife.' If you had been in quite another rank of life it would have been the same. Had you been a princess of the blood-royal or a laundress, I should have had to what is called 'make a fool of myself' for you. I was bound to follow you, to tell you of my love, to try and make you love me, but in any case to marry you. There was nothing else to be done, even if it involved Israel's seven years' courtship, though I should certainly have rebelled against such a long engagement! All my nature cried out for you. It is not only your beauty—though I love that most heartily—but it is the beautiful soul looking from your eyes that I love. Your voice, your touch, your presence, your mind and thoughts, are all just what I have dreamed of as my ideal, just what I require to make my life complete. Selfish that sounds, doesn't it? But I could not quite feel all that unless you had almost equal need of me. That is why I say that nothing must part us; and it would be not only folly but absolute wickedness either for you or for me to try to break the bond between us."

"Even if either of us was—married?" she faltered almost inaudibly.

"To some one else? But that would be impossible. I could not have felt as I did about you if I had not been, as you have often told me, the first and only man who ever spoke to you of love; nor could your eyes have met mine as they did and shown me your sweet child-mind shining through had you ever before cared for any man. There—are all your questions answered, and all your doubts set at rest?"

"Yes—I suppose so," she conceded. "I am tired, Lorin. Take me home now."

They passed out of the Park into the high road, and she walked by his side in silence while he spoke to her, tentatively at first, but with more assurance as she did not attempt to interrupt him, concerning their future plans, gently urging her to fix the exact date of their wedding.

"It seems odd that Mrs. Vandeleur should know nothing as yet direct from you about our engagement," he said; "but of course as you have not seen her that could not be helped. She will be in when you return, no doubt; and then you can tell her and arrange about the purchase of this wonderful *trousseau* which seems to trouble you so much. Surely a fortnight will be amply sufficient to buy all the finery you want? My uncle sends you, with his love, a blank cheque, to be filled in with what amount you please. Shall I give it to you now, or will you take it to-morrow when you are coming to luncheon with us?"

"Oh, to-morrow—to-morrow!" she answered, hurriedly, snatching at the chance of deferring that explanation which sooner or later was bound to come.

If she could only put off the marriage indefinitely the while she could enjoy the solace of Lorin's society, she told herself she would be well content.

"We are so happy as we are," she observed, presently, "that it seems to me to be very silly to hurry to another state of things. Old married people always look back to their courting days as to the happiest period of their lives. Personally I don't in the least want to be married for years to come. We can be dear friends and companions, and can meet when we please——"

"That is not nearly enough for me," he interrupted. "It is like offering a starving man a caramel to expect

me to be satisfied with seeing you occasionally. I must not only see you all the time, but you must belong to me and I to you. My friend Robert Browning, whom you must grow to read and love, has glorified married love, which is the only happy love, in some of the finest lines ever written. Listen!

“‘ Life will just hold out the proving both our powers, alone and blended ;

And then, come next life quickly ! This world's use will have been ended.’ ”

A sob rose in Laline's throat as Lorin, holding her hand close within his arm, bent his head to murmur the words in her ear. The picture they presented before her mind's eye was tantalisingly happy, and yet it was just such perfect happiness that she must nerve herself to banish from her life. Tears blinded her as, with lowered head, she walked on by his side.

They had by this time reached the High Street, deserted at this late hour on Sunday night but for a small group of dirty loiterers outside a public-house, from the doors of which a man was apparently being forcibly thrown.

Laline, who had a feminine terror of drunken men, clung closer to Lorin's arm ; but as he moved quickly to the outer edge of the pavement in order to give the group a wide berth, she felt him suddenly start violently, and looking up, perceived that he was frowning heavily and that he wore a look of deep annoyance.

Following the direction of his eyes, Laline instantly understood the cause of his vexation ; for the man who, lividly pale and madly intoxicated, was struggling in the grasp of three others, shouting curses and dealing murderous blows to right and left of him, was Wallace Armstrong, Lorin's cousin and her husband.

Tightening the pressure of her hand within his arm, Lorin was hurrying Laline past the shameful spectacle, when she suddenly stopped him.

"Leave me," she whispered, with pale lips—"go to him! Take him away before he does more mischief!"

Lorin stared at her in astonishment.

"What—do you know——" he began, when she cut him short.

"I know everything. Leave me and take him home!"

Then, before he could speak, she drew her hand from his arm and flew rather than walked the short distance to St. Mary's Crescent.

Once she had re-entered the house and gained the privacy of her own room, she threw herself face downwards on the bed, feeling utterly worn out and exhausted by the experiences of the past twenty-four hours. Before her closed eyes two faces arose in the darkness—those of the man she loved and the man who was her husband.

As she had last seen them, so they flitted before her, Lorin's face clouded by a look of distress and indignation, which changed to deep tenderness as his eyes met hers, and Wallace's distorted by drink and by fury, as she had seen it years ago upon her wedding-day and again beheld it on this eventful evening.

And as she marked the contrast between them and compared her instinctive dislike and disgust in the presence of her husband with the passionate delight which thrilled her at the proximity of her lover, a temptation stole into her mind and grew stronger every moment.

Why, she asked herself, should not the dead past bury its dead? Laline Armstrong had disappeared—Wallace himself had given out that she was dead and his cousin and uncle believed him. She would even have some difficulty in proving her identity; and without the testi-

mony of Mrs. Melville, between whom and herself many miles of ocean rolled, she would find it almost impossible to connect Lina Grahame with Laline Garth. The latter was dead and her actions had died with her. Why should she, Lina Grahame, hesitate to marry the man she loved because that dead Laline had once gone through a form of marriage with his cousin?

It was quite clear that Wallace did not recognise his over-grown child-bride in the tall and slender woman who was engaged to his cousin; and even Lorin, who had at first been haunted by her likeness to a portrait he had seen of Laline as a child, failed to recall where the picture had met his eyes. Only her own word could betray her, and that word she was strenuously resolved not to utter.

Surely—surely, she argued, as she lay there like some dead thing, scarcely breathing, so intent she was in thought, she would be committing no great sin if she ignored the past? It was not as if Wallace wanted her, remembered her, or had even ever loved her. Wallace was hopeless; and she almost wondered now at her own conduct when she despatched Lorin to his cousin's aid that night. Was she to spoil Lorin's life, and her own as well, for the sake of a degraded and drunken creature, alike incapable of gratitude and of love?

And yet the next moment, through all her horror of the man, there shone a gleam of compassion. Was it wholly his own fault that he was a pariah, driven to herd with social outcasts, to sit and drink his brains away amid tavern surroundings? To her personally, in those far-away Boulogne days, he had seemed extremely kind. She well remembered the treats he had given her and the children, the drives and sweets and pastry, and the pretty things he had bought for her. Her childish mind had been fascinated and interested by the man

whose sable locks and stalwart frame reminded her of Brian de Bois-Guilbert.

Since those days he had indeed degenerated rapidly; but some good there must certainly be in him, or he could not have retained through all these years the affection of his uncle and his cousin. Her own father, too, had helped to ruin him as a very young man; and it was to settle debts incurred in Captain Garth's gaming establishment that Wallace had committed the forgery which first brought about his banishment from his native land.

These thoughts tortured Laline; and through the long hours of the night she lay awake, torn by conflicting sentiments of pity for Lorin, pity for herself, and pity for her husband. Towards morning she had half decided on flight as the sole way out of her difficulties, until the thought of a confession to old Alexander Wallace of all but the name of her husband suggested itself as an alternative course.

Throughout the wakeful hours she strove to fight down the insidious temptation to hold her peace and fulfil her engagement with the man she loved. No happiness could come, she repeatedly reminded herself, of a union founded on a lie. And how could she ever meet Lorin's eyes and hear him asseverate his trust and his belief in her with such a secret between them?

So all through the night the turmoil of her mind endured; and, when she rose in the morning, it was with the feeling that many years of thought and suffering had passed over her head.

Not one word of Lorin did she speak to Mrs. Vandeleur when she asked permission to go out to luncheon; and, once arrived at the bank, she half dreaded meeting him. Adams, the sedate-looking man-servant, showed her into the cosy sitting-room up-stairs, in which tea had been served on the occasion of her former visit.

A man, who was seated by the fire, with his back to the door, reading a newspaper, rose on her entrance and faced her. And Laline saw, to her intense vexation and alarm, that it was not Lorin, but his cousin Wallace Armstrong.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE colour fled from Laline's face as she found herself in the full daylight face to face with the man whom of all the world she least wished to meet.

Wallace on his part was deeply moved by her beauty, by the grace and refinement that distinguished her, and stirred to wonder where he had met the direct gaze of those wistful hazel eyes before. A sleepless night, together with the emotions she had recently experienced, rendered Laline unusually pale; but her pallor and extreme slightness only served to emphasise the spirituality and fragility of her appearance; and, standing there before him in her broad-brimmed black-velvet hat and rich furs, she looked like one of Gainsborough's dainty great ladies come to life in modern costume.

But the daylight, which revealed no flaw in the girl's clear skin and delicate features, touched the man less becomingly. Hard living had furrowed his face and prematurely silvered his hair and the light in his eyes was fitful and sunken. He looked what he was—the wreck of a man gifted by nature with exceptional strength and beauty, one who should have been a king among men, but who had let himself drift downward to the dregs of society.

He would have held out his hand, but her cold glance and still colder bow restrained him. An angry flush passed over his face as he noted them.

"Oh, I remember!" he said, trying to speak with defiant carelessness. "We insulted each other at our last merry meeting, didn't we, Miss Graham? But won't you let by-gones be by-gones?"

"I expected to meet Mr. Wallace and his nephew," she said icily, turning away that he might no longer study her face. She was trembling with excitement and nervousness and almost sick with fear lest he should recognise her. But her secret alarm was only indicated by an unsympathetic staccato of utterance.

"My cousin was telegraphed for to the City this morning, and cannot be here for at least half an hour. As to my uncle, he is at present in his rooms, and I have given particular instructions that he is not to know that you are here."

She turned upon him, white with indignant surprise.

"Do I understand you to say that you have given such an order?" she inquired.

"Yes,"

"May I ask, Mr. Armstrong, your reason for taking so extraordinary a step?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

Laline's heart sank within her. Surely he could not have recognised her?

"I have not the slightest wish for any conversation with you, Mr. Armstrong!" she said, in a voice which it needed all her self-control to render firm. "May I ask you to ring the bell, that the servant may inform Mr. Alexander Wallace that I am here?"

"Wait a minute! I want to go back to something you said the last time I saw you!"

"There is no need, and I must decline to discuss the subject. If you do not ring the bell, Mr. Armstrong, I shall!"

She moved quickly towards the fireplace. She was

horribly afraid of being left alone with him. Something in his coarse and masterful personality affected her with a sense of mingled fear and repulsion, and it seemed difficult for her to breathe the same air with him.

"I want," he repeated, doggedly, coming between her and the fireplace, "to speak to you about what you said when I last saw you."

"Pardon me," she exclaimed, flashing a look of deep scorn upon him, "that was not the last time I saw you! Much later, between ten and eleven at night, I was passing along the High Street, Kensington, and I saw you again!"

She lowered her voice on the last words, and a deep blush of shame for him passed over her face. Wallace saw the colour, and recognised the sentiment that called it there. Something like a flush crossed his face too.

"So you were with Lorin," he said. "I thought as much! All the more reason why I should speak to you. Miss Grahame, it was you who drove me to drink last night—you and no one else!"

For almost the first time in her life Laline smiled satirically. Clearly she did not believe him.

"It is true, all the same," he said, answering her look. "When Lorin got me out of that hole last night—and I admit he's had to do the same thing before—he took me home to my diggings; and presently, when I had had a cooling draught and put my head under the tap, it came out in a little talk that I had called on that table-rapping little woman yesterday afternoon in order to have a look at you. Then, for once in his life, my immaculate cousin lost his temper. I have hardly ever seen him so angry. It appears that he had been trying hard to keep me dark. Such men as I, he had the impudence to tell me, were not fit to cross the paths of such women as you, and it was sacrilege for me even to mention your

name. 'Now I know why she wanted to break off her engagement with me!' he cried out. 'She could not bear the thought of being even distantly connected with you!' It was the first time that Lorin had ever rounded on me like that, and I could have killed him but for the fact that he had just bruised his arm a bit getting me out of a scrape."

"Bruised his arm! Oh, is he much hurt?" Laline cried, anxiously.

An ugly smile crossed Wallace's face.

"A bruise on his arm is of more importance to you than my whole existence— isn't it?" he asked, bitterly.

Laline's spirit was roused.

"Certainly it is, Mr. Armstrong," she retorted; "and I should never forgive myself if, after I had sent your cousin to rescue you in a disreputable scuffle, he had been hurt while protecting you."

"Don't distress yourself. A little arnica, together with your sympathy, will soon cure him!" he sneered. "What I want to speak about is this. When you met me yesterday you told me my cousin had never mentioned my name to you; he confirmed your statement, and he is one of those George Washington sort of prodigies who scorn to tell a lie. I was sober enough yesterday afternoon in all conscience; and yet, from what he said, you at once hated me so much that you wanted to break with him on my account. Is that true?"

The colour came and went in Laline's face, and her heart beat fast. It was indeed only too true that on his account she must part from Lorin—but true in a far deeper and distant sense than Wallace knew or could guess.

"I cannot discuss my private affairs with you," she said in a very low voice, and without looking him in the face.

"But if you have any sense of justice," he returned, quickly, "you will tell me what reason you had for the scorn and hatred—for it was nothing short of that—you showed from the moment that you found out it was not my cousin but I to whose arms you had rushed. Those few seconds, while you clung to me before you found out your mistake, were among the sweetest in my life."

"Mr. Armstrong," she said, growing hot with anger, "if you are only detaining me here to insult me, your conduct is even worse than I expected from you."

"Is it an insult," he asked, "to tell you that a spontaneous caress from a woman as good as she is beautiful made me feel another man? Is it an insult to tell you that, during those few seconds, while you rested your head on my shoulder and I felt the touch of your hands about my neck, I would have given the rest of my life to have been for a few moments only the man you loved?"

"It is impossible!" she cried, in great agitation. "You had not even seen my face!"

"Just a fleeting glimpse in the twilight of beautiful appealing eyes and beautiful arms outstretched towards me. But it was the love in your touch, Miss Grahame, and the love in your voice which moved me. No woman has ever loved me like that. The women I have known have been fools, or worse. But as you nestled in my arms for those few seconds and I smoothed your hair, I understand what a woman like you might make of a man like me."

Instinctively he moved one step towards her, and as instinctively Laline put up her hand, as though to ward him off, and drew a step farther away from him. He saw the action and frowned impatiently.

"Why should you hate me as you do?" he asked, in tones of passionate anger. "Can you not love my cousin without hating me? I tell you it was the thought of

your scornful eyes and your scornful voice that drove me to drink yesterday. I had been half inclined to swear off and reform and be reconciled to my uncle, and all that ; but your disdain seemed to choke me. I couldn't go home and think about it, so I tried to drown the memory of you and your words too. Now be frank with me, Miss Grahame. What could have made you hate me even before we had ever met, unless it was Lorin's account of me?"

"I had heard about you from others," she answered, in a confused tone, averting her face from him. "I—I have a horror of people who drink. I had seen things about you in the papers——"

"Oh, I don't pretend to be a saint!" he broke in. "My life is my own—it's of no value to any one but myself; and what I do with it is no one's concern but my own. My flawless cousin is perpetually playing guardian angel to me. It is a part he enjoys, and he ought to be grateful to me for providing employment for him in that capacity."

"It is your paltry sneers about your cousin that make me dislike you, Mr. Armstrong!" Laline flashed out at last. "I am not one of the women who care for dissipated heroes or who believe in the love of reformed rakes; and I see nothing to sneer at in the unselfish goodness of an honourable man towards an ungrateful relative. The sneers and sarcasm, to my mind, should be for the man who deliberately indulges in degrading vices and then poses as unloved and misunderstood because well-conducted people have no wish to know him."

Just for one second a look of furious anger shot from Wallace's eyes. Then he turned humble again.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "for seeming to disparage my cousin. But why should he have everything and I nothing? Is it not enough to be accepted as my

uncle's heir—to be rich, successful, and popular, and a partner in one of the finest businesses in London—but he must also have the love of one of the best and purest and most beautiful of women? Why should he have everything and I nothing? In this very house, every corner of which I knew as a boy, I have had for weeks and months past to slink about like a hunted thief, flying from the man who should by rights stand to me in the place of a father. I have been allowed here on sufferance by my cousin and the butler, who take it upon them to lock up everything but tea and soda-water while I am about, and who watch me as though I were a dangerous wild beast. Do you think such treatment tends to sweeten a man's disposition or to make him think better of his fellow-creatures?"

"You did not look, when I entered, as though you were here on sufferance, or as if you greatly feared being found here by Mr. Wallace," Laline remarked, coldly.

"No; but for this immunity I have had to do penance with bell and candle. I was only taken back into favour this morning at Lorin's intervention, and have had to promise and vow unheard-of things in the way of reformation before my uncle would condescend to shake hands with me."

"And it was Lorin who brought the reconciliation about?"

"Oh, Lorin—always Lorin to the fore in good works!" he sneered. "I think in this case it was as a set-off in the ledger of his conscience against having gone for me and called me bad names last night."

"Is it possible you feel no gratitude towards him?"

"No," he answered, roughly; "I don't understand gratitude! Love and hate I know, and scorn, and even now and then, in weak moments, something like regret.

But that last is waste of time ; and as to gratitude—why should one be grateful ? No man does more for another than he feels inclined to. Some people enjoy giving up things and being unselfish and denying themselves and so on. I don't. I have never yet met the man or woman who, in my opinion, was worth the slightest sacrifice from me, and I don't suppose I ever shall. Don't turn from me in such disgust, Miss Grahame. Most people think as I do, but fear of others make them hold their tongue about it and pose as being fond of doing good and all that sort of humbug. Now I am not like that."

"No," she returned ; "I see you are not. You like to boast of your evil qualities as though you were proud of them ; and you think it a fine thing to utter bitter and uncalled-for jests at the expense of others, under the pretence of loving truth."

"Miss Grahame," he said, suddenly seizing her gloved hands and turning her face to the light, "what makes you hate me as you do ? It sounds in your voice, which vibrates with dislike ; you shrink back from my touch as though I were a viper ; you can't even look me in the face ; and your scorn breaks out in every word you utter. What possible harm have I ever done you that you should hate me as you do ?"

His fierce pressure of her hands hurt her, and the very touch of his fingers had the effect of making her tingle from head to foot with aversion. A desire, which was almost hysterical in its intensity, came upon Laline to answer him back the truth, and cry,—

"I hate you because you are my husband, because you won me by a cruel and heartless trick, because I understand your nature and my own revolts against it, and because you stand between me and the man I love with all my heart and soul !"

"Why won't you look at me ?" he was asking. "Is my

appearance so loathsome that you daren't even do that? Look in my eyes, and you will read there whether, if I had Lorin's chance, I could not love you a thousand times better than he is capable of doing. Love! He doesn't know what it means. How can a man with beautiful manners and beautiful clothes, a man who paints pretty pictures and plays tennis with pretty girls, a man of flawless character with his pockets full of money and his future nicely garden-rolled before him, know of the passion that burns in the veins of a friendless scamp such as I? Your good men who go to church on Sunday and stick to their desks so many hours on weekdays don't know the meaning of the word passion. Lorin has everything in life—why should he want you too? Good women like you are sent into the world to redeem bad men like me, not to carve beef and mutton for such estimable citizens as my cousin Lorin. A good woman whom I loved and who loved me might do what she liked with me; and, Lina, from the moment when yesterday you ran into my arms, I have loved you and longed to hold you there again!"

"You must be mad!" she exclaimed, struggling to free her hands from his grasp. "If you were in your right senses you would not dare to speak to me like this! I have only once before seen you—I have no feeling for you but contempt and dislike—and yet you talk to me of love! Let my hands go this instant, and never presume to so insult me again!"

She was looking him full in the face this time, with mingled terror and aversion shining in her soft, dark eyes. As he met their gaze, Wallace Armstrong suddenly dropped his hands and fell back a step with a muttered expletive—

"What a likeness!" he ejaculated, and continued staring fixedly at Laline.

In terror lest he should have recognised her, the girl turned abruptly from him and hurried towards the door. Before she could reach it he had arrested her steps by laying his hand on her arm.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "but just for one moment you looked so strangely like some one I once knew—my wife, in fact—a worthless hussy, who deserted me on our wedding-day. I meant to treat her well, for I liked her, and she might have made something of me if she had tried; but she was a true daughter of her father, and bad to the core. For just an instant, though, you looked so like her that it was quite startling."

During this speech Laline had had full time to recover her self-possession.

"Thank you," she said, with glacial politeness. "From your description it is hardly flattering to be likened to such a person. Your uncle and your cousin must have been misinformed. They told me that your wife was an orphan when you first met her, and that she died, deeply regretted, of typhoid fever about a month after your marriage."

He gazed at her curiously, still with his hand on her arm.

"So that is the story you heard—eh?" he remarked. "I said my wife bolted from me on her wedding-day; but I never said I didn't get her back, did I? As to the 'deeply-regretted'—well, we are all deeply-regretted on our tombstones, aren't we? No—don't shake my hand off; if we are to be cousins by marriage, mayn't I even touch your sleeve?"

And at that identical moment, as they stood close together facing each other, Wallace with his hand on Laline's arm and both clearly agitated, the door opened quickly, and Lorin and his uncle came upon them.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOOK of astonishment passed into old Alexander Wallace's face, and into that of Lorin an expression of acute vexation as they stood in the open door-way.

"Lina," the latter exclaimed, "I am so sorry I could not come before. Apparently I need not introduce you to my cousin. You never told me that you had met him?"

"Your cousin visited Mrs. Vandeleur's yesterday afternoon, but I was out of the room nearly all the time," said Laline, constrainedly. "Didn't I mention it to you? Now please let me say 'How do you do?' to your uncle."

"Welcome to my niece Lina!" exclaimed old Alexander, beaming with benevolent joy. "May I have an uncle's privilege, my dear?"

With paternal tenderness he took both the girl's hands in his and kissed her on the cheek.

Luncheon was served in the dining-room on the ground-floor. To Laline it was a terrible ordeal to sit between Lorin and Wallace. The latter, as she afterwards learned, had insisted upon being included in the party, maintaining that his presence at such a family gathering would be the clinching proof that he had been taken back into favour. He was in the highest possible spirits, devoting himself to Laline, paying her compliments, and forestalling her wants at table, the while he, with what appeared like irresponsible gaiety, rallied Lorin on his backwardness in looking after his *fiancée*.

"'A laggard in love,' that's what you are, Lorin!" he cried. "This is the second time you have neglected to

hand the salt to Miss Grahame. Take care I don't prove another young Lochinvar, and carry off your prize under your nose."

"In the case of young Lochinvar, Mr. Armstrong, the bride was willing to go," Laline remarked with some acerbity, whereat old Alexander, who in no way understood the undercurrent of bitterness which lay in both sallies, laughed heartily and declared that Wallace had met his match.

"I wish I had with all my heart, sir!" his nephew retorted, directing a bold glance of admiration at Laline's face; and the old gentleman laughed again in childish enjoyment.

It hurt Laline to see how, in spite of his serious and repeated delinquencies, Wallace was clearly the favourite of Alexander, who was delighted to kill the fatted calf in his behalf, Lorin's years of filial devotion and unselfishness counting for nothing against the shallow good humour and assumed affection of this showy ne'er-do-weel. Old Alexander's eyes rested constantly, with evident content, upon his elder nephew's face; and, pleased as he was by the prospect of Lorin's marriage, to him it was clearly an even greater subject for thankfulness that his boy Wallace had humbled himself before him and been forgiven.

"You must make allowance for me if my high spirits carry me away this afternoon, Miss Grahame," Wallace said. "The fact is—and as you are so soon to be a member of the family I can talk freely before you—I have been a very, very bad boy, and a dreadful disgrace to everybody about me. So I was punished, as bad boys ought to be. The worst part of my punishment was the knowledge that I had deeply hurt the best man in the world, and that I was shut out from my old home and my old place in his affections. So this morning I went

to him and appealed for another chance ; and he, having, as I believe, a corner in his heart somewhere for me, took me home there again. That is the reason of my gaiety to-day, cousin Lina, and I feel sure you will sympathise with me and understand."

As Wallace spoke he laid his hand, with what looked like spontaneous affection, upon that of his uncle, to the left of whom he was sitting. Old Alexander grasped his hand warmly and tears filled his eyes. But the little scene failed altogether to move Laline, who felt only indignant that the simple-natured and kindly old man should be so flagrantly deceived in his worthless nephew, whose sneers and gibes at his uncle's expense were still fresh in her mind.

Lorin for his part talked very little. He had considerable difficulty in concealing his deep annoyance at the attitude which Wallace had adopted towards Laline. He had opposed as strongly as he could the suggestion that Wallace should form one of the luncheon-party that day. Knowing his cousin's record, he disliked the idea that anything approaching familiar friendship should be instituted between his cousin and the woman he loved. Lorin's sense of character was as keen as that of his uncle was deficient. Wallace's pretended affection and pretended reformation in no way deceived him, and, although, from the associations of his boyhood, he still retained some little love for the scapegrace elder who had taught him cricket and football years ago, experience had taught him that no reliance was to be placed in Wallace's honour or Wallace's word.

He grew hot with indignation, therefore, when he marked the insolent admiration in his cousin's gaze, and heard the familiar "cousin Lina" he addressed to Laline. One of Wallace's favourite boasts was that he could fascinate any woman if he choose to try, and beautiful,

pure-minded Laline would not be the first woman who has been temporarily attracted by a plausible scamp.

It was clear to Lorin that, since his cousin's visit to Mrs. Vandeleur's house on the preceding day, Laline had changed towards him. All their talk during their foggy walk in the Park after church had been of deferring their marriage, and to-day her manner towards him was strangely cold and absent. He had surprised her with his cousin's hand on her arm, an incident concerning which neither she nor Wallace had volunteered the slightest explanation, and even now she was passively receiving his flattery and thinly-veiled love-making without any evident signs of disapproval. Not one look, not one word had he a chance of exchanging with her unnoticed by his cousin, although there was very much that he was longing to communicate to her. He had hoped that the occasion of seeing her home might give him the opportunity he longed for; but his presence was required in the bank that afternoon, and old Alexander was loath to let Laline leave so early.

"Even if Lorin is busy, and Wallace here finds for once something useful to do, my dear," he said, "you can stay and have a cup of tea with me at four o'clock, can't you?"

"I have nothing more useful or more pleasant to do than to stay also," Wallace was beginning, when Laline cut him short.

"I will stay alone with you, Mr. Wallace," she said. "You and I can have a nice quiet *tête-à-tête* together."

The idea had been strengthening in her mind ever since her arrival that by old Alexander's assistance she might contrive to break her engagement. The presence of Wallace, looming large and aggressive upon her mental horizon, made all hope of association with his cousin impossible. Laline was suffering acutely. The watch-

fulness of Wallace's bold eyes incessantly fixed upon her face wrought her to such a pitch of nervous excitement that she was hardly conscious of what she said or did. The man exercised a magnetic power over her, so that, much as she disliked and even detested him, she was profoundly affected by his presence. A knowledge of the suffering she would shortly bring upon Lorin increased her distress of mind; she felt she dared not look in his face, lest her glance should be intercepted, or lest he should read in her eyes the consciousness that she was deceiving him.

Yet the very strength of her love and pity for Lorin, and the necessity for putting a severe curb upon her emotions, made her manner of parting with him seem strangely cold.

"Good-bye, Lina dear! At about five o'clock I will return and take you home."

"I may not be able to wait until then. Good-bye!"

How could he tell that her indifferent manner was only assumed, and that her woman's heart was throbbing with grief and vain regret? She could not even trust herself to return his look as he gazed down into her face, his own full of surprise and pain. She drew her fingers swiftly from the caressing clasp of his hand, lest his touch should unnerve her for the work before her, and she let him go from her presence thus, without one word or look to tell him that she loved him.

Wallace Armstrong noted the parting, and formed his own conclusions thereon. He would have given a good deal to win this girl from his cousin. Her beauty, her disdain, and something reminiscent in her face and voice at once piqued and fascinated him. So far as he was capable of loving a woman, he loved her, and he longed most ardently to humble her pride and to make her will subservient to his. He was nearly thirty-one, and his

constitution was prematurely aged by his irregular method of life. Possibly he knew that he was on the downward road, and seized at the idea that he could be saved by the sacrifice of the love of a pure and beautiful girl. Certain it was that he definitely resolved, if the thing could be done, to win Laline from her allegiance to his cousin, either before or after her marriage. Pity and remorse were qualities as foreign to Wallace's nature, where his own selfish enjoyment was concerned, as reverence and gratitude; and on this very day of reconciliation and forgiveness, which was to herald a new era of reformation, when he unwillingly left his uncle and Laline to their *tête-à-tête*, he betook himself, not to the office, in which he had again been offered a position, but to one of his favourite drinking haunts, where he speedily made amends for his comparative abstinence at luncheon.

In Lorin's sitting-room a cheery fire was burning, and Laline drew old Mr. Wallace's arm-chair towards the blaze, while she herself stood with one hand on the mantelpiece and one foot on the fender, looking earnestly down into the glowing coals.

"What a slip of a girl you are, to be sure, my dear!" remarked Alexander Wallace, as he noticed the graceful but unduly slender outline of her figure in its severely-cut blue-serge gown. "It's time you had some one to look after you and make life pleasanter for you! And what is the exact day you have fixed for the wedding?"

She turned and faced him suddenly, very pale, with big tears gathering in her eyes.

"Mr. Wallace," she said, "I am going to hurt you dreadfully—but it hurts me even more. My marriage with your nephew Lorin can never take place!"

Alexander started from his seat and gazed at her blankly.

"Never take place?" he repeated slowly. "You are

surely joking, my lassie! I thought you seemed a bit cold to the boy; but it's only some lovers' tiff, and you will make it up when you meet again. I am not too old to forget young folks' ways."

"There has been no tiff. I love your nephew far too well to quarrel with him; but we must part, all the same."

"Can it be possible," Alexander asked, in bewildered tones, "that you have taken a fancy to my other nephew? I hope not, my dear. Much as I love Wallace—and he is like my own son to me—I hope not. A good woman might be the making of Wallace, I do believe, but her heart might be broken in the process. He's a wild harum-scarum fellow, and——"

"Do you think for one moment," cried Laline, indignantly, "that I would break off my engagement with Lorin in order to marry your other nephew? I have seldom met any one I dislike so much as he in all my life!"

"Yet he's a fine, handsome fellow, and I have heard that women go crazy about him. There's a lot of good in Wallace, too," said his uncle, anxiously; "and you and he seemed very good friends when Lorin and I came in suddenly and found you together before luncheon."

"He had roughly seized my arm and I could not get it away," returned Laline, shuddering at the remembrance of the scene. "I can't endure even to talk about him! Lorin is worth a whole regiment of such men! Lorin is manly and sincere, unselfish and kind——"

"If he is all this, why don't you want to marry him?"

"But I do want to marry him—I want to marry him with all my heart!" she cried, distractedly. "Oh, Mr. Wallace, listen to me and help me with your advice, for I am very, very unhappy!"

She slipped down on her knees on the hearthrug before

his chair, and told her tale thus, nervously clasping and unclasping the slender hands in her lap while she spoke.

"What I am going to tell you you must give me your word to keep secret," she said. "No one must know—not even Lorin. Promise me that."

"I promise; but——"

"I loved Lorin as soon as I met him, and I was proud of loving him, and encouraged him to love me in return. I agreed to marry him directly he asked me. I never tried to hide my feelings for him. You know this, don't you?"

"Why should you hide your feelings? He is a man any girl might be proud to love."

"He is indeed! That's what makes it so hard to give him up!"

Tears were raining down Laline's cheeks now and her voice was choked by sobs.

Alexander Wallace gazed upon her in wondering pity for a moment. Then he gently took her hands, which were pressed to her eyes, and drew her to the side of his chair.

"Tell me all your trouble, my child," he said, tenderly. "Why should you give up Lorin, since you love each other and since there is no quarrel between you?"

"Mr. Wallace," she faltered, "don't think too harshly of me! I have deceived you all. When I was little more than a child I was married?"

"Married?" Alexander repeated, in astonishment. "Then you are a widow?"

"No!"

"Your husband is alive?"

She bowed her head.

A long pause followed. Mr. Wallace let her hands go and rose from his chair.

"Heaven forgive you," he said, solemnly, "for playing

with a good man's love! It was an ill deed, whatever prompted it? My poor boy!"

"Mr. Wallace," cried Laline, springing up and facing him, "don't misjudge me! When I met Lorin, I believed myself free to be his wife. It is only quite recently—within the past few days, indeed—I found out that——"

"That your husband was alive?"

"Yes."

"And you have to return to him?"

"No, no—not for the whole world! I—— Please—please don't ask me any questions, Mr. Wallace! My marriage was a terrible mistake! I had heard and seen nothing of the man I married for several years; I knew of nothing to prevent my marriage with Lorin. Then, by sheer accident, I learned that that other man was still alive. I cannot tell you how much I hate him; and he never cared for me for one moment, and has forgotten my existence. But he lives, and I cannot marry Lorin!"

"But why tell me all this, my child? Why not go to Lorin, and let him hear the truth from your own lips?"

"No, no—I can't; it is quite impossible! I have made up my mind what to do. I must go away from here, to some place where he cannot follow me; and then you must break it to him. Only remember one thing. You must tell him I loved him with all my heart and soul. Tell him I never knew what love was until I met him. Tell him that my marriage was a miserable farce, that within one hour of the ceremony I was far away from my husband, and that I never went back to him again. Be sure to tell him that. Tell him it is of no use to think of me any more. I don't want him to leave off loving me, but he must love me as though I were dead, for I must be dead to him. I shall leave England, and he must not attempt to find me or follow me. I trust to his honour to respect my wishes, for it

is of no use pretending to be better or stronger than I am, Mr. Wallace. I love Lorin so dearly that, if I were to see him or write to him, I don't know what I might say or do. You see it is a great temptation. I am tied to a man I hate, who does not even know that I am alive; yet, because of those words we spoke together years ago when I was too young to understand the meaning of what I did, I must break my own heart and that of the man I love and live lonely and uncared for perhaps all my life. To me it seems bitterly, cruelly hard! Yet I would not for anything let Lorin fall from my ideal of him; and, if we were together, and he asked me to become his wife, in spite of the law, I could not be sure of myself, and perhaps I might say 'Yes.' Now do you understand why you must tell him all this and not I?"

"I understand," the old man answered, in a broken voice. "My poor children!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

ALEXANDER WALLACE was, it is to be feared, incapable of keeping a secret.

Had he not been a singularly lucky man with an excellent head for figures, he would never have augmented the splendid business which came to him from his father, for he was almost incapable of deception and by nature as trustful as he was truthful.

His nephews were both men of wider education and more subtle brains than he possessed, and both could read him like a book. As a result of this, Lorin anticipated his wishes and studied his comfort in every detail,

while Wallace took advantage of the old man's weak points and sneered at his guilelessness.

It followed therefore that, as soon as Lorin entered his uncle's presence at about five o'clock that day, and found him greatly agitated and Laline already departed, he became convinced that some talk had passed between them intimately connected with his own future happiness, and set himself to work to find out of what it was composed.

"Have you and Lina settled the wedding-day between you, Uncle Alec?" he inquired, taking his stand by the fireplace, so that the lamplight fell full on his companion's face.

Alexander Wallace's features twitched as at some painful remembrance, and there was an embarrassed pause before he replied—

"‘There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' my boy. I should not tease Lina about the date, if I were you. She has known you so short a time that it is not surprising she should want the wedding put off for a bit."

"Oh, but I shall never agree to that!" Lorin returned, in tones the coolness of which belied his keen anxiety. "The first thing to-morrow I shall buy the licence; and before the end of this month we shall be man and wife."

"Ay, if she will have you."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing!" Alexander returned, confusedly, remembering his promise to reveal nothing until Lina was far away. "But girls change their minds, so people say."

His attempt at acting was a complete failure—a child would not have been deceived by it. Lorin, from his vantage-ground back to the light, stared relentlessly

into the old man's face, which gave his words the lie, and a great fear began to creep into his heart.

"Did Lina tell you she does not love me?" he asked, after a pause.

"No, no, my boy—no word of such a thing!"

"Did she tell you she meant to break with me? Answer, for Heaven's sake, and tell me the truth! It is not like you, Uncle Alec, to hesitate and beat about the bush and say what you do not mean, and it is not fair to me. My life's happiness is at stake and I must know what she said to you."

"I cannot break my promise to her!" exclaimed Alexander, rising in deep distress. "Lorin, my boy, you should give up all thoughts of her—for the present, at least. I fear, my lad, it is not to be and that you must forget her."

"You might as well tell me to tear my heart out and not feel the pain! What reason did she give you? But she can't be in earnest; she only means to try me."

"She is absolutely in earnest, and she trusts to you to respect her wishes. Consider what a short time you have known her——"

His words fell upon heedless ears. Before he had finished speaking Lorin darted from the room. In a very few seconds he was down the stairs, out of the house, and in a hansom on his way to 21, St. Mary's Crescent.

Only one idea filled his brain—he must see Lina, must never leave her until she had sworn to be his as soon as the Church could marry them. To-morrow he would buy a special licence, and, that bought, she must instantly become his wife, so that no more deadly torturing fears of losing her could harass him.

Twice he shouted to the driver to go faster; and a block in the thoroughfare at the top of Sloane Street

threw him into a fever of nervous impatience. The hideous supposition that she might be induced to jilt him for his cousin rose more than once in his mind, to be angrily dismissed again. She must be merely wishing to try him out of girlish coquetry, for which she should be punished by being married, *trousseau* or no *trousseau*, within the next twenty-four hours. Of that he was fully determined.

"I am too jealous to be an engaged man," he told himself. "Lina must be mine altogether, and I must take her away with me. I know she loves me. What could possibly come between us? It must be some girlish freak on her part. But I am glad I have to see her, for I am starving for a kiss! I must see her alone, and will kiss away from her lips the memory of her coldness to-day. What a confoundedly slow cab this is! I could walk the distance in half the time!"

At St. Mary's Crescent bad news awaited him. Susan, who showed him into the morning-room on the ground-floor, and took his name up-stairs to Miss Grahame, returned to tell him that that young lady could not receive him. She was suffering from a bad headache, and had gone to bed.

"Gone to bed? It isn't six o'clock yet! Is she really ill, Susan?"

"Yes, sir."

Lorin looked doubtfully at Susan; then he drew a sovereign from his pocket and laid it in her hand. While she was feebly affecting to return it, he closed her hand upon it, and spoke in low quick tones in her ear.

"Susan, have you a sweetheart?"

"Dear—no, sir!"

"No one who loves you?"

"Well, sir, I won't quite say that——"

"Susan, remember what your sweetheart would feel if he were disappointed about seeing you, and tell me the truth. Has Miss Grahame really gone to bed?"

"Not quite, sir; but she is in her room, and looks dreadful bad. She's been crying, sir. She was crying while she spoke to me."

"You must take her a note."

"Will you write it in here, sir?" asked Susan, in sympathetic tones, putting pen, ink, and paper on the table before him, and discreetly retiring a few steps.

And Lorin wrote thus—

"MY OWN DARLING HEART—I must see you! I can't live another hour unless you speak to me! I have something of the utmost importance to both of us to propose. Lina, my only love, why were you so cold to me to-day? Why won't you see me now? And why are you crying? See me just for one brief instant, and let me kiss your tears away! Lina, I shall go mad if you treat me coldly! You can't possibly understand what you are to me or you would never play with me like this. Lina, you have my very heart and soul in your keeping; I will not even believe it possible that you could treat me badly until I hear it from your lips! See me, my darling, for Heaven's sake, just for one moment! You need not even speak. Come down and give me one kiss, my wife that is to be, and I will go away happy. Only come!

"Yours, through life and death,

"LORIN."

A silly, incoherent, lover's letter, but poor Laline's eyes overflowed at each line of it.

Susan waited discreetly outside the door while Miss Grahame read it, and heartily hoped the handsome, pleasant-spoken young gentleman with the beautiful

blue eyes and lovely curly black hair would not be disappointed.

Presently Laline's voice came to her from within the bedroom.

"Go to Mr. Armstrong, Susan, and tell him I am very sorry but I am not well enough to see any one to-night."

A stifled sob came after the words, and Susan decided that Miss Grahame was "awful cruel," and did not deserve so fascinating a sweetheart.

"And him a young gentleman of fortune, and she only a sort of governess, too!"

This was Susan's private comment. Aloud she said timidly—

"Mr. Armstrong seems in a dreadful way about you, miss. Shall I tell him you are feeling a little better now?"

"Please tell Mr. Armstrong just what I have said and no more!"

"Fine airs she do give herself, to be sure—and her no better-looking than some other people!" Susan said to herself, as she flounced down-stairs. "It isn't everybody that admires them thin women! She isn't half as pretty as Miss Clare to my way of thinking! Miss Clare and me we have got a bit of flesh on our bones; and I've heard say that's what the men admire, and not your scrag-ends of girls!"

But aloud to Mr. Armstrong, eagerly waiting in the front room, Susan, with demure mien, merely repeated the message Miss Grahame had given her.

Lorin knitted his brows.

"She is really ill, then, Susan?"

"I think she is upset, sir, about something—more than ill, so to say."

"Ah! Is your mistress in?"

"Yes, sir. She is in her study."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you take her a note, too, Susan, while I wait for an answer?"

"Certainly, sir!"

Susan was growing quite excited over this little romance. Lorin, on his part, understood something of Mrs. Vandeleur's nature, of her shrewdness, her inquisitiveness, and her love of what Americans call "bossing the show," and being appealed to as an arbiter of fate. There was therefore some subtlety in his note, which ran as follows—

"MY DEAR MRS. VANDELEUR—On my memorable first interview with you not many weeks ago you told me various things about myself that were true, and foretold others that have since come to pass. You were also good enough to express yourself in kind and friendly terms towards me, and to advise me to come to you should I need counsel. At this present moment I am in deep distress and perplexity, and should be most grateful for your advice and help. Will you give them? Hoping fervently that your kindness may move you to do so, I remain,

"Yours very faithfully,

"WALLACE LORIN ARMSTRONG."

He had not long to wait for an answer. In a very few seconds Susan tripped down with a gracious message, and showed the visitor into her mistress's study.

How well he remembered, as he entered, his first meeting with Laline, the slim white figure dimly visible in fog and firelight, and the look of fear and astonishment with which she had turned towards him as she dropped

the crystal ball at his feet in her alarm at his unexpected entrance. It had all happened so few days ago, and yet it seemed to Lorin that he must always have known Laline, that she must always have been part of his very existence, and that his hopes and aims must ever have centred wholly in her. The room, with its odd accessories, gleaned from Eastern and mediæval art by modern superstition, recalled her image so vividly before his mind that his eyes turned involuntarily to the low seat by the fire, as if expecting that the form of Laline herself would resolve itself from the shadows and rise on his approach.

But the little gray lady with the jewelled fingers and the bird-bright eyes was alone, peering at him out of her long-handled eye-glass set with garnets and turquoise.

"So you have sought me?" she said, extending a small ivory-like hand towards him. "I thought you would! You were rather sceptical, too. But let that pass. Shall I tell you, or will you tell me, what you have come about?"

"As you like," he answered, sinking into the chair she indicated with a wave of her hand.

"You are passionately in love with my beautiful secretary. For that I owe you a very deep grudge. She was just the white-souled, child-hearted creature I wanted for my work, and you have spoiled her. When she came to me her mind was as a clear page; now it is disfigured by an ideal picture of you. Yes—disfigured, to my way of thinking, in spite of your good looks, Mr. Armstrong. If she had remained the passionless white-flower soul she was when she came to me, we might together have completed my two great works in a comparatively short space of time. But now this tiresome, transient love-rubbish has already rendered her self-conscious, capricious, and hysterical, and from the calm, soulful study

of the occult, she has fallen to studying only you. What is the result? Lina can't write, she can't think, she has headaches, and cries when she is looked at. That is not the psychic state in which to approach loftier spheres of thought. That is the worst of our sex. Give them the hope of fortune, of distinction, of a career, a calm and elevated sphere of thought, which would raise them above the little aches and pains and vexations of humanity, and what do they do? At the distant vision of a man, it all goes to the winds! All my secretaries have been like that; and I might have guessed that Lina, who is very much the most beautiful, would not escape this craze for the male sex which is a drag upon the spiritual progress of almost every woman between seventeen and fifty. Why could you not have fallen in love with my niece Clare? That would in no way have interfered with my work or my plans. Clare is very handsome, I suppose, although it is not a type that I personally admire. Were I an elderly man, however, I could imagine myself raving about her. You were supposed to be Clare's admirer at first, and had you continued to be so I should have nothing to complain of. Between my niece and me there is nothing in common. She is too mundane, too full-blooded for me. She is like too much sunlight coming glaringly in one's eyes between Venetian blinds—the shock all the cruder because of the pretence of concealment and shade. But Lina—she is far too good to be wasted on a man! Love and marriage take all life and individuality out of ninety-nine of every hundred Englishwomen; and the better the woman, the more like a cow or a cabbage she becomes under domesticity. There—my sermon is ended! Now you can recount your little love-troubles; but don't suppose for a moment that you have happened upon a sympathetic listener!"

"I would rather be understood than sympathised with," he returned, gravely. "Mrs. Vandeleur, all that you have been saying is extremely interesting. But, to take your own admissions, Lina is young, exceptionally beautiful, and essentially womanly. That being the case, she must necessarily give and inspire love. Although she is exceedingly intelligent, she makes no claim to mental or spiritual gifts above the average. Although you and I may agree that she is made of 'spirit, fire, and dew,' and that the 'good stars stood in her horoscope,' to most people she would only appear a charmingly attractive girl, whom any man might fall in love with. That is the way in which men, and women too, think and speak of girls, and I am inclined to think such a method of thought will prevail as long as this world of ours. Given these premises, isn't it a good thing that Lina, of whom I am sure you are fond, should be going to marry a man whom you dislike so little as you dislike me?"

"I don't dislike you at all," said the little lady, smiling graciously enough. "There is much in your nature that I admire, and with which I am in accord. Your cousin, on the other hand, is quite remarkably evil, although extremely interesting. But, to go back to your tiresome little love-affair, which of course to you blocks out all other subjects from your mind, and will for a few weeks—what puzzles me is not that Lina should be trying to part from you, but that she should ever have consented to marry you. Did you really in so many words ask her to be your wife? And did she say 'Yes?'"

"Most certainly."

"It is very extraordinary indeed! And I must tell you it was only through my niece Clare that I heard one word of this love-business between you and Lina. The girl herself can hardly be persuaded to speak of you at all."

"Why should you be surprised at our engagement, Mrs. Vandeleur? You must have seen that I loved her."

"To fall in love and to suffer was marked in your hand. With Lina things were different."

She was thinking of that previous marriage of Lina's, which the girl had half confided after the elder lady had half guessed it.

"And now," said Lorin, rising and coming over to Mrs. Vandeleur's table, "as the mischief is done, and your secretary merged in the woman who loves, I have come to throw myself upon your compassion and implore your help. Something—I don't know what—has come between Lina and me. Last night, when I met her on her return from church, she was strangely agitated, although twenty-four hours before I had left her full of love and happiness. She spoke of deferring our marriage, and to-day, when she came to luncheon, her manner towards me had incomprehensibly altered and she barely spoke to me. Some confidence passed in my absence between her and my uncle, and induced him on my return to speak to me about breaking off our engagement. And when, on realising the purport of his stumbling hints, I hurried off here, Lina refused to see me, and sent a message to say that she had a headache and had gone to bed. Mrs. Vandeleur, there must be some reason for this extraordinary change of front. I do not, I will not, believe that it is mere caprice on Lina's part which induces her to treat me thus. Therefore, I come to claim your help. You understand her, you can influence her, you can find out what is the obstacle her imagination—for it can be nothing else—has placed between us. Do this for me out of the kindness of your heart—I beg, I beseech of you!"

She looked up smiling into his handsome, glowing face.

"I promise you I will do my best to serve your cause," she said, holding out her small pale hand; and Lorin, catching at the hope, raised her fingers gratefully to his lips.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHEN Lorin Armstrong descended the stairs after his interview with Mrs. Vandeleur he felt that he had secured a valuable ally.

If any one could coax from Lina the reason for her conduct it was the little gray witch, whose manner inspired and almost compelled confidence, and who, however much or little she might understand the world of spirits, was marvellously quick in finding out anything she wanted to know about matters pertaining to this earth.

It had been arranged between them that he should call at noon on the following day, by which time Mrs. Vandeleur was to have had a long interview with Lorin's recalcitrant love-lady. Had the matter rested with him the young man would have gladly waited on the doorstep of Number Twenty-one throughout the whole of that evening, or, with equal celerity, would have presented himself there before dawn on the following day. But Mrs. Vandeleur clearly was not a woman to be hurried in well-doing, and she had no intention of either detaining Lorin this evening or of putting in an appearance before her usual time on the next morning, solely because her secretary had tried to quarrel with her sweetheart.

Lorin had therefore to content himself with impressing upon her the vital importance to his very existence of a speedy reconciliation between himself and his di-

vinity, and had then perforce to depart, full of new hopefulness, until, at the foot of the stairs, he found gleaming at him across the dimly-lighted hall the strange green eyes of Clare Cavan.

Meeting with the girl at this exact moment affected Lorin unpleasantly as an evil omen. From the artist's point of view he admired her immensely, and often hoped he might some day have time and opportunity to sketch her as Vivien tempting Merlin. She was an ideal Vivien, but that fabled lady was also a more or less sinister personage, and at this moment it clearly appeared as though mockery gleamed in Miss Cavan's catlike eyes and echoed through her purring accents.

"Oh, Mr. Armstrong, I am so sorry you are off just as I have come back! I have never yet been able to offer you my congratulations on your engagement. It was so very sudden, you see, and Lina has said so very little about it. But perhaps I am premature?"

"Not at all," he returned, coolly. "So far as I am concerned I heartily wish my marriage with Miss Grhame could take place to-morrow."

"How perfectly sweet! But you men are all like that; you want us poor little women to scamper off to the altar without a thought of *chiffons* and bridal costume, and frocks and shoes and gloves and those pretty things which will perhaps last us longer than all your much-vaunted affection! I've been quite longing to meet you for another reason, too. Your cousin and namesake called on us on Sunday afternoon, and I think he is perfectly delightful! So humorous and original, and so unlike the ordinary men one meets in drawing-rooms. I assure you we all found him simply irresistible! Didn't Lina tell you so?"

"I really can't recall it."

"Oh, Mr. Armstrong, I do really believe you are jeal-

ous! But I assure you Lina will never have a chance of talking to your cousin while I am about. I do so love eccentrics. And I have just been hearing the quaintest stories about him from my friends the Fitzroy-Cleavers."

Lorin winced. The cat-claws showed through the fur in that last thrust, and he felt he hated the girl and her malignant tongue.

"I am glad my cousin pleased you, Miss Cavan," he said, quietly, "and that his conversation was so well suited to your taste."

She flushed ever so slightly under his remark.

"Shall I tell you a secret?" she asked, assuming her most ingenuous and innocent air. "Women always like that type of man the best, whatever else they may pretend. There's a confession! You must go after that. But you'll find some day that I'm right."

As soon as she had closed the door upon him, Clare summoned Susan and closely cross-questioned her as to the length and other details of Lorin's visit. On these points the maid was voluble and precise, having supplemented her knowledge at first-hand by listening at the library keyhole.

"It wasn't much that I could catch, miss—I was that afraid of misses finding me out and setting her spirits after me, or of cook coming up and down stairs. But something misses is going to do for Mr. Armstrong; and he's to come round about it at twelve o'clock to-morrow. Most likely misses is going to try to make friends between them again—don't you think so, miss?"

"I can't tell, Susan. But it's very interesting, isn't it? Quite like a novel. And you shall have that green-velvet hat of mine."

Clare was intensely curious to know the rights of this quarrel between her rival and Lorin Armstrong.

"Pumping" Laline was never any use; but by adroit flattery and artful questions she could sometimes extract information from her aunt, even though the latter resented her intrusion in the study during working hours. But, with the secretary in tears in her room, Clare decided she might risk it, and she accordingly sped lightly to the study door, and, after an admonitory tap, burst in with a great appearance of spontaneity.

"Oh, auntie," she exclaimed, "do let me run in for a few minutes' chat! Why, where is Lina?"

"She is ill—a headache or something. Pray don't flutter, Clare! Fluttering gets on my nerves."

"I wonder what is the matter with Lina?" Clare remarked, taking a seat and slowly removing her hat. "Have you noticed how strangely she has altered since her engagement?"

"All girls alter when they get engaged," said her aunt, maliciously. "Joy turns their heads, I suppose."

"I don't think it's joy in Lina's case," pursued Clare, shaking her head doubtfully. "No; it seems to me she has something on her mind."

"What do you mean?"

By her aunt's tone Clare divined she was on the right tack.

"Well, do you know, Aunt Cissy," she said, with confidential mystery, "I have some reason for supposing that Lina knows of a secret barrier between her and Mr. Armstrong—that that is why she is trying to break with him—before he finds it out, I mean."

"Where did you get that idea from?" asked Mrs. Vandeleur, sharply.

"Well, I would rather not say who told me in so many words; but I have suspected the thing before," Clare went on, feeling her way, and wondering whether she was going to stumble on the truth. "Of course you

know how people will talk, and this is the sort of thing they say—that it is quite too reckless of Mr. Armstrong, in his position, to offer marriage to a girl about whose antecedents he knows absolutely nothing at all. Why, even you know very little more, do you, auntie? And Lina is twenty, and has had to earn her living somehow since she was a child. And of course she is perfectly lovely, in that thin ethereal style that some people rave about. She is so oddly reticent, too, about her past—haven't you noticed it? But, now that she is going to make such a splendid and unexpected marriage with such an extremely charming man as Mr. Armstrong, no doubt it all comes back to her. She is very religious, you know, and very likely would rather give him up than be married under false pretences, poor girl!”

To the whole of this elaborate speech, evolved bit by bit from Clare's inner consciousness, Mrs. Vandeleur listened, with her brilliant hazel eyes peering intently through her glasses upon her niece's face. But as the girl finished, the little gray lady rose from her chair in her wrath, every fold of her soft brocade bristling with indignation.

“Do you venture to insinuate,” she inquired in icily deliberate tones, “that my friend and companion and fellow-worker hesitates to become an honourable gentleman's wife because her past career has rendered her unworthy to fill that position?”

Clare was considerably taken aback; but she resolved to stick to her guns.

“I certainly meant that,” she answered, feeling in her own heart that after all she had probably hit upon something very like the truth.

“Then, if these are your opinions—and they are, after all, only such as I should expect from you—let me tell

you that you are not fit to take my white-souled Lina by the hand! I know every secret of her heart, and there is not one thought hidden there which would not shame you by its purity!"

"I would not disturb 'your belief in Lina for the world," observed her niece, a little red spot of anger forming itself in the whiteness of her cheeks; "but, on a subject like this, we may each keep our own opinion, may we not? I myself am very fond of Lina."

"That is not true! You hate her, and are bitterly envious of her!"

"I! Envious of her!"

The white eyelids and yellow lashes were scornfully lowered over the angry eyes.

"I wonder, Aunt Cissy, that with your gifts and your genius you are so easily deceived! I am not strait-laced, as you know; but, really, I have never cared to make a companion of Lina Grahame. She has, I don't doubt, some very good reason of her own for letting Mr. Armstrong escape from her clutches."

"Would you like me to prove to your face that you are lying?" Mrs. Vandeleur inquires, in a white heat of anger and excitement.

"Unfortunately that is impossible— isn't it? You could only get Lina's word, and I don't quite think I should accept that under the circumstances."

"You shall hear it in a form which you cannot fail to believe!" the little lady cried in triumph. "I will put Lina into a hypnotic sleep, and she shall answer me as she would answer her own soul. With her own lips she shall, in your presence, clear her good name from the foul slur which you, in your mean jealousy, have cast upon it. And this shall be done this very evening—here, before your eyes!"

"Dear auntie, pray don't excite yourself?" Clare urged.

"Such an ordeal would be unfair to the girl. I really meant nothing."

"I have made up my mind," said the little sibyl, as she sharply rang the silver hand-bell on the table before her.

In Lorin's interests she had already decided to submit Lina to hypnotic influence in order to extract from her the entire truth with regard to her present plans, and she was genuinely glad of the opportunity of proving to her niece how undeserved were her reflections on her rival.

For Mrs. Vandeleur had no trace of doubt but that Laline, when put to the test, would triumphantly prove her spotless innocence in a manner which must convince even the evil-minded and unbelieving Clare. She was revelling in her favourite part of Fate's representative. Lorin should be made happy, Clare confounded, and Laline vindicated by one and the same process.

"Hide yourself!" she signed to her niece imperatively. "Lina must believe herself alone with me. Turn out the lamp in the inner room, and conceal yourself behind that Japanese screen. When she is unconscious, I will signal you to come near."

"Ask Miss Grahame if she will kindly join me here at once, Susan," was the mandate given to that young woman on her appearance in answer to the summons.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I think Miss Grahame's poorly and is lying down."

"Do as I tell you! Ask her to come to me now!"

A few minutes later, almost as pale as the white dress she had donned to please her employer, Laline entered the room. Suffering had made her super-sensitive; she seemed instantly to be aware of an inimical presence, for she glanced nervously about her before advancing towards Mrs. Vandeleur.

"I—I thought Clare was with you!" she stammered.

"I have just sent her away. I want to talk to you. My dear child, why this avoidance of me? I assure you I am beginning to be hurt. To think that I should have to wait to learn the news of your engagement from the lips of others——"

"Don't—oh, please don't!"

The girl pressed both hands to her burning forehead. She had wept herself into a weak hysterical state, but she was anxious not to break down.

"I meant to write to you to-night," she went on presently, more calmly. "I didn't feel quite equal to talking to you. During the past few days I have lived through several lives of pain and thought, and I feel weak and worn out. Dear Mrs. Vandeleur, you have been so wonderfully kind to me that I wish I could tell you all the truth! The one thing I must tell you is that I must leave your house to-morrow."

"Leave me to-morrow! Why, where are you going?"

"I must not tell you—I hardly know myself yet. But it must be somewhere where no one I have met lately will ever find me. I have to begin life all over again."

"But, my child, what does all this mean? First, I am astonished by hearing of your engagement with Mr. Armstrong, knowing, as I did, that you were not free to marry; next, you refuse to see the poor young man, and worry him until he is nearly mad by your sudden and capricious coldness; and, finally, you walk in here, with red eyes and white cheeks, and tell me you are going to the other end of the world to-morrow. What can it all mean?"

"I cannot tell you. It has all been a terrible mistake. But, if you believe in me and care for me at all, dear—dear Mrs. Vandeleur, put no obstacle in the way of my

going, and never let Lorin or any one know where I have taken refuge. Don't ask me to tell even you, but let me pass out of all your lives within the next few hours, and try to always think the best you can of me."

Just for one instant the thought flashed through Mrs. Vandeleur's brain that perhaps, after all, Clare's suspicions might not be altogether without foundation. Laline's mental attitude seemed hardly consistent with perfect innocence. But she loyally hated to entertain the doubt, and held out her little hands impulsively towards her *protégée*.

"Come here, my poor, dear, pale child!" she cried. "Put your head in my lap—so—and let me charm away your headache with my fingers. No—don't cry any more! These love-affairs are infinitely wearing, I know. There; let me touch your eyelids and charm away your tears! Is that better?"

"Much better!"

Laline spoke drowsily. She had flown to her friend, deeply moved by her sudden display of tenderness and sympathy, and had unsuspectingly knelt at her feet, weeping tears of gratitude. Yielding herself thus readily to the magic of Mrs. Vandeleur's touch, she became, in her unnerved and broken condition of mind, the most susceptible subject possible to hypnotic influence.

Even while she still spoke her eyes became fixed and vacant in their gaze. Still the little lady's fingers swept in slow caressing touches about her brow and eyelids. A deep sigh quivered through the girl's parted lips, and her head fell heavily forward on Mrs. Vandeleur's knees.

"Clare! Quick! Help me to lay her in this chair. Move away and let me place my hand on her brow—so!"

Pale and inert as a dead thing Laline lay. Clare drew a little on one side and held her breath with excitement.

Then, through the perfect stillness of the room, Mrs. Vandeleur's sweet voice sounded, speaking low, in slow distinct tones.

"Lina, can you hear me?"

A faint quiver passed over the still face; then the voice came as from a long way off—

"Yes."

"Do you love Lorin Armstrong?"

"Yes."

"Shall you marry him?"

"No."

"Why have you broken your engagement?"

"Because I am already married."

"Married!" burst from Clare's lips in amazement.

"Silence!" exclaimed her aunt, imperatively. Then, turning again to Laline, she asked slowly—

"What is the name of your husband?"

A pause, and then softly, but with perfect distinctness, came the words—

"Wallace Armstrong."

"Not Wallace Armstrong—Lorin's cousin? Can you mean him?" cried Mrs. Vandeleur, in horror.

"Yes."

"When did you marry him?"

"More than four years ago."

"Tell me your name before you married."

"Laline Garth."

"Good heavens! But he thinks you dead. Does he or any one know or guess the truth?"

"No one."

Clare drew a long breath. The discovery meant everything to her, and the one idea in her mind was to communicate the precious secret in the right quarter.

A faint sigh and a fluttering of the eyelids from La-

line made Mrs. Vandeleur bend anxiously over her prostrate form; and in the slight diversion thus afforded Clare slipped noiselessly from the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

EVERY nerve in Clare's body was tingling with revengeful joy over the possession of her rival's secret.

Of Laline's selfishness in wanting to marry both the Armstrongs she could not think without hot indignation. Ignoring the mistake which Laline had made on her first meeting with Lorin, Clare naturally supposed that her rival had deliberately gone to work to win Lorin from his allegiance, although she knew herself to be already married.

That Laline detested her husband was very clear. Under an entirely new light Clare recalled the short and angry scene between them to which she had been a witness on the preceding Sunday.

Doubtless, so Clare decided, Laline was at present drawing back and holding Lorin off only in order to pique him into an immediate union; and Miss Cavan set her short, sharp, white teeth vindictively together as she planned destruction to Laline's schemes.

"Of course she married the one cousin for his money, and probably found him a brute and ran away from him. Then she must have trusted to not meeting him or to his not recognising her when she set to work to get hold of the other! What consummate impudence! I really almost admire her for it. Now if I can only find Wallace Armstrong the elder, and find him sober, I shall be the blessed means of restoring a missing wife to a loving husband's arms."

A very unpleasant smile curved her thin scarlet lips as she reflected thus while completing a hasty out-door toilet before the looking-glass in her room. Opening her door, she stealthily crept out to listen for sounds from the floor below; then, reassured by the perfect stillness, she fled noiselessly down and out of the house, sprang into a hansom in the High Street, and directed the driver to Wallace Armstrong's lodgings off the Strand, where once before she had called in order to deliver "A Well-Wisher's" warning letter.

Mr. Armstrong was out, Clare was informed by an elderly housekeeper, who gazed at her with evident suspicion, and who evidently disapproved of a beautiful and well-dressed young lady calling at the rooms of a handsome and dissipated bachelor at nine o'clock in the evening.

But Clare was too much excited to be sensitive on this point, and at once begged for an envelope and a piece of paper, upon which she scribbled an emphatic mandate to Wallace to come at once to St. Mary's Crescent on receipt of her message at any time before midnight.

"Drive very slowly along the Strand," she told her driver, when she left the house; "I am looking out for some one."

Laline's evil star was in the ascendant that night, for Clare's cab had not proceeded many yards, with its occupant craning her neck out of it, when she suddenly signalled to the driver to stop.

For there, before her eyes, lurching along the Strand, with his hands in his pockets, on his way from one drinking-bar to another, was the object of her search—Wallace Armstrong, Laline's husband.

Laline's husband! Clare's heart leaped in triumph at the thought, which amply avenged her for any slights

and disappointments Laline had unwittingly caused her to suffer.

In vino veritas—and, after three or four hours of constant tippling, there was that about this man's face which it was not good to see. The "ape-and-tiger" qualities within him, which for over ten years his way of life had fostered and developed, never very far beneath the surface, were rampant now, and stared from his bloodshot angry eyes, and showed themselves again in his rolling walk, his hot clenched hands, and swollen, sullen mouth. Had Clare Cavan's nature held aught of the womanly she would have shrunk from the notion of handing even an enemy over to the tender mercies of such a man as this.

But Clare Cavan had no pity for the girl who had supplanted her in her aunt's favour and in the love of so rich and handsome a suitor as Lorin Armstrong; and, although she was annoyed at the stupefied condition in which she had found the man of her search, she was by no means minded to put off her interview with him.

Stopping her cab, she sprang out and seized Wallace by the arm.

At first he stared at her stupidly, then, with a laugh and an oath, he tried to shake her off.

"Mr. Armstrong, don't you know me?" she hissed in his ear. "I am Clare Cavan, niece to Mrs. Vandeleur. We had a talk yesterday—about your cousin and that Miss Lina Grahame he is engaged to. Don't you remember?"

"Curse them both!"

He was swaying heavily in his walk, and hardly seemed capable of understanding her words; but Clare was not inclined to lose a moment.

"Jump into this cab with me!" she urged, holding tight to his arm, in part to sustain his halting footsteps

and in part to impress the importance of her mission upon him. "People are staring at us. We can't talk here; and I have something I must tell you."

His spirit-laden breath made her faint and sick with disgust; but spite was stronger in Clare at that moment than any other feeling, and she waited quietly while Wallace hurled his massive form into the seat by her side, and with tipsy hilarity flung his arm about her waist.

"I remember you now," he hiccoughed—"the wicked little red-haired girl, whom I kissed yesterday afternoon over the tea-table when I went to the little witch's house to see what Lorin's girl was like! I hate that girl! I dreamed of her scornful face and disdainful eyes; and she 'cottons' to my precious cousin, and is down on me just because I am poor and out of favour. It's the way of the world—the way of the world——"

"Should you like," broke in Miss Cavan, impatient of his maudlin prolixity—"should you like an opportunity of punishing this girl for her insulting conduct towards you, and of paying out your cousin at the same time for having stolen your place in your uncle's favour?"

"Should I like? Give me the chance!"

"What would you give," Clare asked slowly and distinctly, "to have that girl in your power, to know that you were her master, and that she could not escape from you, while Lorin, whose wife she was to have become, gnashed his teeth and tore his hair with jealousy and rage?"

"What would I give? I think I would give my soul—if any one would take it!"

"I have come to you to-night," pursued Clare, her eyes glittering like emeralds under sunlight, "to tell you that this girl, Lina Grahame, is your lost wife, Laline Garth!"

"Laline! By ——! I half guessed it!"

The shock of the news sobered him. For some seconds he sat by her side, perfectly quiet, staring in front of him and pulling at his heavy moustache. Then, suddenly turning upon her, he asked, in an altered tone—

"How did you find all this out? Mind, I know it's true; I don't require proofs. Jove! How she brazened it out to-day, trying to stare me in the eyes while I held her hands! She's a confoundedly good actress! But all you women are good at lying and deceiving. What possessed her, though, to confide in you?"

"She didn't confide in me. She has no idea that I have discovered her secret. She doesn't mean that any one shall know. Your half recognising her must have frightened her, though. She has been talking of breaking off her engagement to Lorin and of going off somewhere by herself."

"Her engagement to Lorin! My wife's engagement!"

He burst into a coarse laugh of enjoyment—a long laugh, during the course of which Clare watched him impatiently.

"Well, what do you mean to do?" she asked at length. "Do you mean to stand quietly by and see your model cousin take not only your inheritance but actually your wife from under your nose?"

"No, by ——, I don't! Laline shall come with me. I'll break her spirit and tame her pride for her! She always gave promise of being pretty, but she's a real beauty now! So that's the reason of her black looks and scornful words—eh? Husband number one had turned up to spoil sport just as husband number two was fairly hooked. Upon my soul, the impudence of it beats me! And this slim, Christian-martyr-like saint, who looks almost too pure for things of this earth, was coolly

planning bigamy all the time, and would have carried it through but for the chance of your finding her out! Hang the hussy! She has cost me a pretty penny already. Her father ruined me, when I married her to get him out of a hole, and she bolted on our wedding-day——”

“On your wedding-day? I thought you had been married a month!”

“How should I know? It all happened years ago. Anyhow, there shan’t be any doubt that she’s my wife now.”

“I wouldn’t claim her to-night if I were you,” purred Clare. “I wouldn’t come to the house and make a scene so late. I would wait until the morning. Lorin is coming in the morning at about twelve, so you will know when to time your visit. But you must take her by surprise and appeal to her sense of duty, otherwise I know her quite well enough to be sure she will give you the slip again. For you know she doesn’t like you.”

“I know she hates me,” he returned coolly, stopping the cab as he spoke. “Here we are in the High Street, and I’ll stroll back home and think things over. My head aches a bit. I know Laline hates me, but, by Jove, she doesn’t hate me as you hate her! I could almost find it in me to be sorry for the poor wretch now that you’ve got your knife so deeply into her,” he concluded, as Clare bent out over the hansom and gave him her hand in parting. “You are delighted with this night’s work,” he said roughly, “because you think you have handed over a girl you hate to a drunken brute who will ill-treat her.”

“I am glad,” she said, with a narrow smile that showed her white teeth, “to have found for Laline a husband of whom any girl might be proud. Good-night, Mr. Armstrong.”

He could have struck her sneering red lips and forced the lie back into her throat. He hardly knew which of the two he hated the most at that moment—himself or her. He stood staring after the hansom for some seconds after it had driven away, and threw an oath or two after it before resuming his stumbling walk Strandwards.

“There goes my match,” he said to himself.

He was perfectly clear in his thoughts by this time, though still unsteady on his feet. All through his moral turpitude, his treachery, ingratitude, and bitter sneers at his betters he never for one moment deceived himself, as so many better and worse men have done, by believing himself a fine and noble character labouring under undeserved persecution.

Right down in his heart he knew that Laline was infinitely too good for him, and that, if her love was given to Lorin, it was the man and not his money that she prized. Her treatment of himself he resented bitterly, but he knew full well that she, of all people, had good reason for despising him. Years ago he had learned that the true reason of his bride’s flight lay in the fact that she had overheard the interview between her father and himself immediately after the ceremony in the registry-office, and had thus been rudely thrust from her fool’s paradise of childish gratitude and affection.

At the time her flight had angered him, as it had rendered the task of propitiating his uncle and extracting money from him more difficult; but for the girl herself he had had few regrets that an extra glass of cognac could not effectually drown. She had been only a pretty ungainly child then; but now it was very different.

Staggering along the snow-covered streets, he laughed aloud as he thought of the blow he was about to direct against both his cousin and Laline.

“Lorin’s fond of unselfishness,” he reflected, sardon-

ically. "He's always had a mania for giving up things to me—I wonder how he will like giving me up my wife? The joke of it is that, whatever I may do, she must certainly be in the wrong in the eyes of everybody, for the simple reason that I am her husband—husband to one of the prettiest women in London, and I didn't know my own luck till half an hour ago. Lorin will be hard hit; but I'll make him a present of the red-haired one, and she'll keep his hands full looking after her. My doddering old uncle will be delighted. He'll bless us and weep over us and set us up in the Homestead; and, by Jove, I'll invite Lorin to dinner and bully Laline before him! I knew her eyes in a moment—I remember how that innocent stare of hers used to make me uncomfortable years ago. For every scornful word, for every scornful look, I'll pay her back a hundredfold. While she was Lorin's sweetheart there were leagues before us, and nothing I could say or do could touch her; but, now that she is my wife, I think I can punish her, and her hatred will give a wonderful zest and excitement to our future life together."

It was very necessary, however, that she should not be frightened away prematurely. Wallace forgot even to drink as he walked on, his brain becoming clearer at every step. He must have an interview with Laline on the following morning, and he would not come too early—a very early visit will start her fears, and she might refuse to see him—but about mid-day. Then, with a flush of excitement, he recollected that his cousin was to call at St. Mary's Crescent at twelve.

"She is certain to see him," he reflected, with a grin; "and when they are comfortably *tête-à-tête*, and he is well into the swing of his wooing, urging her to marry him at once, and she coyly deprecating and kissing—no doubt they will be kissing—I will tip the servant to

show me right into the room where they are. *Tableau!* It will be the finest moment of my life!"

Having settled his plans for the morrow with elaborate cunning, Wallace reeled off to finish the evening among his favourite tavern acquaintances, to drink a farewell to his bachelor-existence, as he put it in his own mind, although he knew quite well he should encounter from Laline a desperate resistance against his wish to take her back again.

"But my will is stronger than hers," he reflected. "I remember frightening her once by telling her some stuff I invented about the lines of her hand. My will should dominate hers, and our fates should be bound up the one in the other, or some such nonsense. But it had a bit of truth in it all the same."

Not one word concerning Laline did he breathe to his cousin when they met at the bank on the following morning. Lorin, as he observed, looked pale and worried and anxious. At half-past eleven the younger Armstrong left the building, and Wallace quickly followed him. Lorin hailed a hansom, his cousin followed in another, which he stopped opposite the narrow turning into St. Mary's Crescent.

Wallace, from across the road, saw his cousin admitted into Mrs. Vandeleur's house, whither he was bent on following him. Meantime he walked up and down on the opposite side of the way, smoking and watching the narrow opening to the Crescent, the while he revelled in the joys of vengeful anticipation.

"Just a quarter of an hour, and I will darken your horizons!" he said, and chuckled to himself.

But very much may happen where emotions are concerned in fifteen minutes by the clock, and, long before then, Lorin Armstrong had found himself alone in the presence of Laline.

Mrs. Vandeleur had said so far not one word of last night's discovery to Laline. She had sent for her at an unusually early hour in the morning, and had kept her fully employed, on one pretext or another, until Lorin's arrival. Then, when Susan announced his name, Laline sprang from her seat and would have left the room, but Mrs. Vandeleur detained her.

"You must see him!" she exclaimed imperatively, laying her hand on the girl's arm. "And you must tell him the truth—the whole truth. It is the only course fair alike to him and to you."

Then, before the girl could speak, the little sibyl had glided from the room, giving place to Lorin, and the door had closed behind him.

"Lina, my darling—at last!" he had cried, stretching his arms towards her. But she, with a white, terrified face, had held up her hands to ward off his caress.

"Don't!" she called out in a strangled voice. "Lorin, we must not love each other! And I have deceived you, for I am a married woman!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"You can't know what you are saying," Lorin said, gently, after a pause. "You forget what has passed between us—you forget that you have again and again sworn that I am the first man you have ever loved, that my kisses are the first ever laid on your lips; and now you tell me, without any warning, that you are another man's wife——"

"No, Lorin—I never said so! It would not be true. Just four years and a half ago I went through a cere-

mony at a registry-office. Remember I was only just sixteen and very unhappy at home, and I had no idea of the real value of my action. I had only known this man for three weeks, and had seen hardly anything of him. He was my father's friend, and—my father is dead, Lorin; but he was not a very good man. The two arranged the whole thing. It was a bargain, for a certain sum of money depended upon an immediate marriage; and this sum they agreed to divide between them. Of all this I knew nothing; but we were very poor and in debt, and I was very lonely after my dear mother's death, and had to do rough servant's work. And when this man came and bought me sweets and pretty things to wear, and took me and all my childish friends out for treats and excursions, he seemed a sort of fairy prince, and I was quite proud of the idea of getting married and coming away to England, where I had been so happy with my mother as a child. But, within an hour of the marriage, I heard them quarrelling—my father and this man; and he—my husband—spoke of me already as a drag and a bore to him. I was to be made to lie and cheat if I did not help him in his schemes to get money, and to be subjected to ill-treatment if I did not obey him. And, as I listened to all this, I suddenly changed, and from a child grew into a woman. Escape was the one and only thought in my mind. By myself I came away to England, to the house of an old school-fellow of my mother's, who kept a school at Norwood. I taught there until she left for Australia to get married; and then I answered Mrs. Vandeleur's advertisement and became her companion. There—now you know all my life, and I am not deceiving you any more!”

Her voice broke as she finished speaking, and she sank on a chair by the window, gazing out, with tear-

laden eyes that saw not, upon the dreary snow-covered square. Every line of her figure looked drooping and forlorn, and Lorin's heart ached with pity as he beheld her.

"Dear," he whispered, gently, "was it quite fair to wait until now to tell me all this?"

"You don't understand," she returned, looking at him in a helpless, frightened manner. "When I first knew you, I thought I would not speak one word of this until after—after we were married."

"After we were married? Laline, you can't know what you are saying! If your husband is alive, our marriage would not be legal."

"I can never make you understand," she said, leaning her elbows on a little table before the window and burying her face in her hands. "I was dense enough, mad enough, to believe you were my husband! That is why I loved you so readily—that is why I let my heart go out to you—that is why I encouraged you to make love to me! Oh, I have been a fool! But you would try to forgive me, I know, if I could tell you what I am suffering now."

"You—thought—I—was your husband?" he repeated, slowly, feeling utterly bewildered. "Laline, what can you mean?"

"It was the same name!" she sobbed, weakly, breaking down altogether. "And, when you were shown into this room that evening, I had no idea that there could be another Wallace Armstrong——"

"Good heavens!" he cried. "You cannot mean—— It would be too horrible!"

"It is true all the same," she said, raising a white tear-washed face to his. "I am Laline, your cousin Wallace's wife."

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, staring down at her with

dilated eyes. "I saw his wife's grave—Wallace and her uncle showed it me——"

"It was all an invention," she said, wearily, "to account for my disappearance. Captain Garth was not my uncle, but my father. I was married to your cousin not a month, but an hour, when I disappeared. They altered the date of the certificate. Oh, you can prove that what I say is true by making inquiries at Boulogne! And now I have confessed; no more lies stand between us and we can just say 'Good-bye!'"

He stood silent for a few moments, looking at her.

"Why should we say 'Good-bye'?" he asked, in a low, unsteady voice. "Does Wallace know of this?"

She shook her head.

"No. And until he came last Sunday, and I, thinking it was you, rushed into his arms, I believed—on my honour I believed, Lorin—that you were my husband. Oh, I cannot tell you how happy the thought made me! I used to whisper to myself, 'I am Laline Armstrong and his wife already.' But I dared not tell you, partly because we were so happy together that I feared to spoil things, and partly because I had heard you speak so harshly of that poor Laline. So I waited, and you never hinted at the existence of a cousin and a namesake; nor did your uncle either——"

"We were ashamed of him," Lorin said, curtly. "He had not long been out of prison, and I feared to displease you. But go on."

"There is nothing more to tell," she said, in the same tired way. "When I found the horrible mistake I had made, I felt as if I should go mad. For the first glance at your cousin's face and the first sound of his voice told me that it was he I had known at Boulogne and whom I had married!"

"And you could believe," he exclaimed, in reproachful

astonishment, "that I could have married you as a child for money, and could have threatened to ill-treat you if you did not lie and cheat for me?"

"Lorin," she said, suddenly, "when once I knew you it didn't matter what I remembered against you; for I loved you instantly, and I forgot—deliberately forgot—all that I thought I knew against you! At every word you uttered during our first meeting my thoughts grew gentler about you. When you left the house I watched you, as you know. I dreamed about you all that night; and from that moment the idea of you never left my mind. You see," she added, breaking down again, "I thought I was growing to love my own husband."

"And I remembered you," he said, wonderingly. "I had seen at Boulogne a portrait of you, with loose hair about your shoulders, as a child. But are you really sure that Wallace does not recognise you?"

"I half feared he would yesterday. Oh, Lorin, I can't bear even to talk of him! The very sight of him turns me sick and cold with dislike! Lorin"—seeing that he stood aloof from her, looking stern and pale—"you are not going to tell me to go back to him?"

In an instant he was kneeling by the side of her chair with his arms wrapped about her.

"Go back to him!" he repeated in horror. "Heaven forbid! Lina, you don't know the man—you can't understand his nature. The very thought of his claiming you is sacrilege! That marriage of yours is all an ugly dream which you must forget. It is not as if he wanted you, or as if he even knew of your existence. I want you, darling! My whole nature cries out for you! I cannot live another day without you. Listen to me, my dear one! I don't believe your story—you have no proofs of it. You have, on the contrary, my cousin's word, Captain Garth's letters, and the Boulogne certifi-

cate against you—and the testimony of my own eyes too, for I saw Laline's grave. You are not she. You are 'Lina Grahame;' and by this time to-morrow you shall be 'Lina Armstrong.' All that you told me was pure fancy. You are weak and hysterical and overwrought, and living in the unwholesome, over-strained mental atmosphere of this ghost-ridden and witchcraft-haunted house has turned your brain a little. There is only one real and true thing in life, only one thing worth reckoning with—our love for each other. The rest are shadows and fancies. Clasp your dear hands round my neck, my queen, my wife, and forget everything but that I love you and you love me!"

He was holding her passionately to him, raining quick hot kisses upon her lips and eyes. The fear of losing her worked in him like madness, and he felt that he must clasp her close and fast against the world.

And she? For a few brief seconds she yielded to the dear delight of his embrace, and clung to him, still sobbing like a penitent child. But, even while her lips met his, it seemed as though the spectre of Duty rose impalpably between them, and she turned her face abruptly away from his kisses and drooped her cheek upon his shoulder.

"We must part, all the same," she whispered. "Think, Lorin. I am your cousin's wife—I have sworn to keep faith with him. How could I meet him and your uncle and all the world and know that I was a cheat and a fraud?"

"I tell you those are mere fancies!" he exclaimed, almost angrily. "But you need never meet these people. I have quite sufficient income for us to live abroad. We should not mind where we went, so long as we were together—should we, dear?"

"No," she cried, rousing herself by a supreme effort

and walking away from him, with her hands pressed to her eyes—"no, Lorin; I must not listen, and you must not urge me! You know in your heart that what I said is true, and you know that we must say 'Good-bye.' To-night I shall leave London——"

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know yet. I have to begin a new life alone."

"That you shall never do. Your life belongs to me, as mine to you. Even if all that fancied tale were true, of what value is the promise wrung by fraud from an ignorant child beside the vow made with all her heart by a loving woman? You have given me your word, and you cannot take it back. I will not release you; and wherever you go, Lina, I will follow you!"

He had sprung after her and caught her in his arms, holding her so closely that his grasp hurt her. Laline trembled and cried; but, with all her heart and soul yearning for his caress, she felt powerless to resist him. So they stood a moment, she with her pale cheek pillowed on his breast, while, bending his head, he spoke rapidly and passionately in her ear.

"Does nature count for nothing?" he whispered. "Does it mean nothing that your whole soul asks for me as mine does for you? Does it mean nothing that our ears are dull and dead to other voices, and our nerves unresponsive to other touches, but that when we speak to each other, when my lips meet yours—like this—a very heaven opens to us both? We never meant to love each other, darling, but, as soon as we met, love came! I knew that you must be mine. And, even if your story were true and not an idle dream, what should stand between us? Our love, our life's happiness, on the one side; on the other, a childish promise to a man who does not want you, who does not love you, who is not even

aware of your existence. There is no hesitation possible, Lina. Your heart, throbbing with love for me, has answered for you."

She reddened and paled by turns as she listened to his words, and a very intoxication of bliss seemed to rise to her brain as he put the temptation before her. Yet that it was a temptation she knew; and, with only the thought of religion and of her dead mother's teaching to support her, she meant to fight against it. She could not love Lorin the less for wishing to persuade himself that a lie was truth; but the consciousness of her power to make him faithless to his ideals, and his power to make her perjured and foresworn, filled her with something like terror. Inwardly she called on a Higher Power for aid in her weakness; and, as they stood together thus, moved by a very whirlwind of passion, doubt, hope, and despair, neither Laline nor Lorin heard the door softly open to admit a third actor into the scene.

The new-comer was Wallace Armstrong.

No contrition, but a malicious joy filled his mind as he beheld the two standing together in lover-like attitude—Lorin with his arm round Laline's waist, and she with her head on his shoulder. The sight of their pale, agitated faces amused him hugely. He had already taken the edge off any finer sensations he might possess by more than one brandy-and-soda, and for the space of several seconds he stood watching, with a kind of ogre-like geniality, the endearments of the pair whom he was about to separate forever.

From the inner room where he stood their figures were clearly revealed against the window; but they, for their part, had no suspicion of his presence until Laline broke again away from Lorin.

"Ah, what is the use of talking?" she cried. "I am

another man's wife; no words can alter that, even if he has forgotten me!"

"But he has not forgotten you, Laline!"

Then they both turned and faced him, knowing that the worst had happened and Wallace had come to claim his own; and, as Lorin gazed from his cousin's face to that of the woman he loved, a dumb rage seized him.

He understood Wallace better than any man living, and, although he invariably took his part and bore with him as no one else had ever done, in his heart he could not refrain from loathing the man's vices even while he tried to make allowances for him to others. Grief had rendered Laline's appearance even more fragile and spiritual than it was normally; the despair in her soft eyes was like the voiceless agony of a dying animal. Lorin felt that his self-control would give way if he looked at her, or if his eyes sought that companion-picture of the man, brutalised and degraded by drink and dissipation, whom the law had made her master. Turning abruptly away, he walked to the window and stood there a few seconds with his back to the other occupants of the room.

"I am afraid," Wallace observed sardonically, after a short pause, "that neither of you are particularly glad to see me. I am really sorry to disturb your charming little matrimonial plans; but, as I happen to be the lady's husband——"

"Understand," exclaimed Lorin, turning round upon him fiercely—"I will have no cowardly sneers at the expense of this lady! If she has indeed the misfortune to be your wife, I pity her with all my heart and soul!"

"Pity is akin to love, they say."

"And I love her and honour her and reverence her,

and would give my life to serve her! Lina, you know that, do you not?"

"Yes," she said, softly—"I know it, Lorin. But we must say 'Good-bye,' for I am going away!"

"Not without me!" put in Wallace, advancing farther into the room. "Why, Laline, now that I have found you, do you think I shall let you give me the slip again? Look at my cousin there and look at me. Which of us looks as though he wanted a woman's helping, saving hand—he or I? He has his money-making, his friends, his amusements, his afternoon-parties and balls, his painting and dabbling in art. But what have I? I am shunned and despised because I went off the rails long ago and contracted bad habits which no one has ever cared for me sufficiently to break me of. If you had stuck by me all these years and had had a little patience with me, I should not have been the worthless wreck I have become."

She looked at him doubtfully, a woman's gentle pity struggling with her instinctive aversion against him.

"I could not have helped you!" she murmured. "And, when I had heard the truth, I could not stay."

"The truth!" he repeated, in what sounded like accents of genuine passion. "What do you call the truth? You heard an angry altercation between two men, neither of them wholly sober and each trying to provoke the other. I have never been one to wear my heart upon my sleeve, and, had I told your father I wanted to marry you because I loved you, and because I believed that you could make another man of me, he would have been the first to disbelieve me. Remember, though he was your father it was he who first ruined me, he who first introduced me to bad company, and taught me cynicism and taught me fraud. Oh, I was an apt enough pupil, I dare say! It is always easier to learn evil than good. But, Laline,

with all my heart, bad as I may have been, I pitied you for the hardness of your life at Boulogne, and I meant to make you happy. In your pure eyes I read my last hope of salvation; and, though I won you by a trick, I never meant you to regret your bargain. I meant to reform—I should have reformed, but your desertion maddened me; and, since you left me, I have gone from bad to worse. Listen, Laline—I am your husband, but I renounce a husband's right to your obedience! I want your helping hand to save my life, such as it is, as a drowning man wants a rope to save him. Will you refuse to hold it out to me?"

His voice seemed to ring with sincerity and fervour. Laline began nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. Her eyes sought those of Lorin; but he, very pale, with features sternly set, stood a little apart from the other two, as though he knew that his part was played, and that he could now be only a spectator in their life-drama of life. Already he guessed how it would end, for he knew that his cousin would move Laline to pity and remorse, both of which would be causeless and undeserved.

For Lorin understood that his cousin was but acting the penitent to gain his own ends, as he had often acted it before and afterwards mocked at his own performance. In this case the prize for which he played was no longer the loosening of a credulous old man's purse-strings, but the life and soul of a woman, the woman Lorin loved.

Yet his tongue was tied. He would not even raise his eyes to her face lest he should influence her decision. And, as he waited in the silence that followed Wallace's appeal, Lorin felt himself growing old with pain.

Had he only known, it was his presence which swayed Laline far more than that of her husband. Her heart

was torn between regrets for lost opportunities and neglected duties, pity for the man before her, and an instinctive, intense dislike against him ; but, stronger than all these, there surged up in her heart a flood of passionate love for Lorin, a love so strong and unreasoning that she herself was terrified by its force. That she should feel thus now in the very presence of the man who had a legal right to claim her and whom she had sworn to cherish seemed to Laline a sting both horrible and sinful. Once she turned to Lorin appealingly ; but his eyes were averted and he steadily avoided her gaze. The full daylight showed her her husband's face, worn and old before its time, his stooping form and prematurely silvered hair, and the look of eager humble longing he knew well how to assume.

Only by one act could she save herself and Lorin too, and it seemed to Laline that her mother's voice sounded in her ears, telling her of the duty which lay straight before her.

With a dry sob in her throat she spoke to Wallace.

"I am your wife," she said, "and I will come to you. Now please go—and leave me quite alone!"

CHAPTER XXX.

EXACTLY a fortnight later Laline stood for the last time within the little room in which she had slept during her stay in Mrs. Vandeleur's house. Within an hour she would have turned her back on St. Mary's Crescent forever. Now, as she gazed for the last time round the simply-furnished room, it seemed as though she had lived, not a few weeks only, but a whole life-time within

the four walls of the old house in Kensington. Love, joy, and hope, terror, hatred, and dumb despair, were mere names to her until she became an inmate of Mrs. Vandeleur's household, and the first three of these she was leaving behind her as it seemed forever.

She moved mechanically about, putting the finishing touches to her packing. Clare's help she had declined, for Clare's malevolent satisfaction at the turn things had taken was more than Laline could bear. Of Lorin she had seen nothing since that interview which Wallace had interrupted; but she knew that he had left London. Old Mr. Wallace had told her that when he had come to visit her, ready and willing to forgive all Wallace's past lies and deception, and to welcome Wallace's wife with open arms. He had distracted her with questions, and striven hard to induce her to alter her determination to leave England with her husband immediately, but to no purpose.

"I cannot stay in England," she had said; "but, if you can find your nephew an opening abroad, I will go with him, and will do my best to make him happy and to help him to lead a new life amid fresh surroundings."

As to Wallace, he was tired of London, so he declared, and perfectly willing to leave it. Once away from his uncle's and his cousin's eyes, he could dispense with all make-believe of working, and settle down comfortably to spend the liberal allowance which old Alexander would settle upon the wife of his favourite nephew. In a few years' time, so the old man stipulated, the young couple must return—if not for good, at least for a long visit.

"I must have my children about me when I die!" he had pleaded.

And to this Laline had agreed. She would have agreed to anything only to put the sea between her and

the man she loved, but of whom she would not even let herself think now.

She had sent him back his ring without a word ; and now, within a few hours of leaving London for Liverpool on her way to Canada, a letter from Lorin had arrived with the postmark "Rome."

She would not open it at first, but held it in her hand as she walked about the room. She had reached a passive stage of grief, a point at which all feeling seemed to have left her, and she could look forward without either interest, curiosity, or even dread to her future existence.

By a succession of cablegrams Alexander Wallace had secured for his ne'er-do-weel nephew an opening in Toronto in the office of an old friend and client. Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong were to travel from London that evening, and sail from Liverpool for New York early on the following day.

And now, just as Laline had reached the stage of dull, feelingless acquiescence which usually follows a storm of emotion, the sight of Lorin's handwriting on the envelope made her heart quiver and ache, awakening to pain again.

Yet his words, when she could summon up courage to read them, were few and restrained.

"I received the ring," he wrote, "and I am sorry you did not care to keep it. My uncle writes that you are going to Canada. I hope with all my heart that you will be happy there—happy and prosperous. You will no doubt be writing sometimes to my uncle, so that I shall be able to hear about you. I shall be in Italy some weeks, or I may cross to Spain. I do not very much care where I go, but I may have to cut my wanderings short for Uncle Alec's sake. He is used to me and may

be lonely. I shall not be writing again; but you will remember—will you not?—that at any time, while we both live, if there is anything in the world you wish me to do it shall be done.

“WALLACE LORIN ARMSTRONG.”

She read the letter with hot dry eyes. Then she sat down and learned it by heart—every word. That done, she tore it into little pieces and burned them one by one in the candle she lit for the purpose. Not one tear did she shed during the work, and her eyes were still tearless when she descended to the study to take leave of Mrs. Vandeleur.

To all appearance that lady was far more agitated than she.

“You are really going to him!” she exclaimed, rising hurriedly and coming over to where Laline stood, white as death, in her travelling-costume. “To the last I thought you would escape. Lina, you don’t know what it is to live with a wholly uncongenial nature. You and your husband were born under opposing stars; he is wholly animal, you are as wholly spiritual. My poor dear child, my heart bleeds for you, and I feel as though I had brought all this upon you!”

The little lady had indeed bitterly reproached herself for having permitted her treacherous niece to be present on the occasion when Laline, under the influence of hypnotism, had confessed her marriage.

“You have always been very kind to me,” Laline said, in dull steady tones. “I ought to have confided in you fully from the first; but it is useless to speak of that now.”

“You seem so strangely resigned,” the little lady exclaimed, peering at her curiously—“almost as though you did not realise what you are doing! It is a terrible

thing to give your whole life into the keeping of a man you can neither love nor respect; but perhaps your feelings towards him have changed."

A shiver ran through Laline's frame. For a moment her dry lips refused to speak. Then at last she answered in unnaturally low level tones—

"Love is not everything! I want to do my duty!"

"It is so difficult to say what is one's duty," the elder woman said. "We owe duty to ourselves first of all. We may starve our own souls while fulfilling what we imagine to be our duty towards others. Is your mind quite made up?"

"Quite!"

"Take this, then, as a parting gift."

With a little key which hung at her watch-chain Mrs. Vandeleur unlocked a glass-covered table in which she kept some of the more valuable of her amulets and charms. Drawing out a slender gold chain of Eastern workmanship, from which a five-pointed star in beaten gold open-work depended, she flung it round the girl's neck. On the star some words were inscribed in Oriental letters.

"It is a charm," she whispered—"a charm which will preserve its wearer against the wickedness of evil minds. Wear it for my sake. Good-bye, my poor child! Remember, if you find the life impossible, you have always a home with me."

"Good-bye," Laline said, with a pale smile—"and thank you! But I shall not come back."

Her mind was resolutely fixed upon the line in life which she must follow, nor would she allow any room in it for regrets over the past or dread of the future. She had seen a good deal of Wallace during the past few days when he had called at St. Mary's Crescent. By Laline's request Mrs. Vandeleur had generally been

present on these interviews, and Wallace had always been on his best behaviour, assiduously acting the part of a man of good and kindly impulse, whom weakness and neglect had caused to deviate from the straight path.

Yet, school himself though he might, here and there a look, a chance phrase, betrayed his real nature—selfish, cynical, and callous—and struck a chill fear into Laline's heart. That good existed in him she could not doubt, nor did he lack appreciation of goodness in others. And in yet another fact there lay hope for his future—he was unmistakably in love with his wife. Possibly his love, strong as it was, was of its nature ephemeral, too fitful and violent to last; but it was none the less certain that Wallace loved Laline, after his own fashion, with a jealous and exacting passion, stronger than he had ever yet felt for any woman.

Yet his love was very far from bringing happiness along with it. So far in life he had accustomed himself to despising the entire female sex, and the conviction that this woman, who was by law his property, was immeasurably above him, that only her religion and duty constrained her to tolerate him, that he might kill her pride and break her spirit, but that never could he hope to win the love she had so freely lavished upon his cousin, irritated him at times almost to madness.

He was her husband; she would follow him through the world, link her life to his broken fortunes, bear with his furious temper, his drunkenness, and his brutality, be proudly silent under his ill-usage, and remain throughout her whole existence faithful to him in word and deed, and yet he knew already that of her mind and heart he would never be master, that she would be kind to him, pitiful, and patient, but that her love he might not hope to gain.

Sometimes, after leaving Mrs. Vandeleur's little oak-panelled sitting-room, in the scented air and amid the weird accessories of which he felt strangely out of place, he would give way to a furious access of rage against his wife as he recalled her image, sitting there in her low chair by the fire facing Mrs. Vandeleur, and looking at him with those soft, searching dark eyes of hers. She was always kind to him; she listened to him with a great effort to appear interested in the unfolding of his plans for their future; but it was very difficult to lie to her, and sometimes an impotent rage against her kept him silent, lest he should break into curses against her cold quiet purity and aloofness from such a man as he.

His nerves were broken by the life he had led, and now and then he absolutely dreaded lest the mingled love and hate with which she inspired him might move him to strike the light out of that beautiful pale face of hers. Through all her gentleness he fancied he could read her dislike of him and the strain his presence inflicted upon her, and the thought stung his pride and self-love intolerably.

Thus the time had passed with him until the very day fixed for their departure from London. It had been arranged that Laline should call in a cab at her husband's rooms, and that they should proceed together to the station to catch the train for Liverpool. The arrangement was Laline's. She especially wished that Wallace should not come for her to St. Mary's Crescent. Between him and Clare there appeared always to be a kind of secret understanding, which puzzled and distressed Laline, who had no suspicion of the part Clare had played in the recent events of her life. Unpunctuality was one of Wallace's distinguishing characteristics, and, to guard against this, it had been arranged that

Mrs. Wallace Armstrong should call with her luggage on the cab at nine o'clock, as the train for Liverpool left Euston Station at ten.

On the stroke of nine, therefore, a four-wheeled cab drew up at the door of Wallace's rooms in the dreary side street off the Strand. The elderly landlady opened the door so promptly that it was plain she had been on the watch, and her manner to Laline was very different from what it had been towards Clare Cavan on the occasion of that young lady's flying visit a fortnight before.

"Mr. Armstrong's things are all packed, ma'am, according to his orders. But Mr. Armstrong is not in just now. I expect him every minute. He went out about ten this morning and hasn't yet returned. But he expects you, ma'am. Please step inside and let me give you a cup of tea."

As she spoke she opened the door of a sitting-room on the ground-floor, a room furnished in the depressing fashion peculiar to London lodgings. Something in the untidy and neglected air of it, in the odour of stale spirits and tobacco, and the quantity of newspapers strewn around, took Laline's thoughts back instantly to the old Boulogne life with her father. There was plenty of time yet, and her head throbbed with a dull incessant pain. She therefore accepted the landlady's offer of tea and sat down in a shiny black horsehair armchair, with her eyes fixed on the clock, to wait for her husband.

The minutes ticked by. Tea was brought in. Laline drank it and dismissed the sympathetic but inquisitive landlady, who opined that "gentlemen do get detained like when they meet a friend in the Strand—especially gentlemen that are going abroad. It's 'Good luck to you!' and a glass here and a glass there, until many a

gentleman doesn't rightly know the time of day or whether he's on his head or his heels."

Still the minutes ticked by. The half-hour struck, the quarter, and finally the hour. The train which was to take them on the first stage of their journey towards that new life in the West had left the station by this time, Laline knew. Motionless she sat, watching the hands of the clock, while the cab waited outside with her luggage, until the full pain and humiliation of her position suddenly burst upon her with overwhelming force.

Wallace was spending the day drinking, and had probably forgotten all about the appointment. The landlady outside, peeping curiously at her every now and then through the chink in the folding-doors leading to the adjoining room, knew it, and pitied her. She could not go back to Mrs. Vandeleur's—she had burned her ships. By this time every one believed that she and her husband had left London. This was the beginning of the ordeal she must go through, and, coming after a long period of intense strain and suffering, it seemed more than Laline could bear.

Suddenly slipping on her knees before the chair on which she had been sitting, she stretched up her arms in a despairing prayer to Heaven.

"Help me! Help me! I cannot bear it! My heart will break!"

She did not hear the folding-doors open; she did not see the shambling figure standing in the aperture with haggard eyes fixed upon her. She never guessed that Wallace had come home after a day spent in wild excess, and that, hearing of her presence, he had crept first into the bedroom and endeavoured, by plunging his head in cold water, to make himself presentable to his wife. He had forgotten the time fixed for the train, but

he retained an uneasy sense of a last chance lost. The cold water partly sobered him, but right through his dull blurred senses Laline's heart-breaking cry pierced to his very soul.

He had spoiled his own life, and no new one was possible. He knew in his secret heart that he should go on in the old way again and drag her life down in the misery of his. She had come to him to save him, and already her heart was breaking. Lorin, too, who had been his friend through everything, was breaking his heart away from his home and his love. He turned back into the room and looked at himself in a strip of glass affixed to the wardrobe. Gray-haired, pallid, with shaking hands and bloodshot eyes, was he worth the sacrifice this girl was making for him?

Every nerve in his body thundered "No!" And, moved by the first unselfish impulse of his life, he crept out into the darkness and slippery rain of the thaw outside.

"'Found drowned,' that's what they'll call it. And she need never know."

So his horrid stumbling footsteps led him down to the embankment, and the turbid waters closed that night over one more wasted life.

* * * * *

One year later Laline Armstrong, a widow but never a wife, was married very quietly to Lorin in the presence of his uncle and Mrs. Vandeleur. Clare Cavan was not present. She had not indeed been invited, but was consoled about that time by an offer of marriage from an elderly and wealthy stockbroker, which she at once accepted. Rumour has it that it has proved a miserable union, and that Clare's husband's jealousy is beyond parallel. But, at least, her toilettes are much admired.

As to Lorin and Laline, we may leave them with a quiet mind, sure that for them—

“Life will just hold out the proving both their powers, alone and blended;

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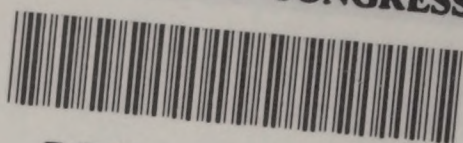
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